George V. Higgins • Roy R. Behrens • Lucia Nevai

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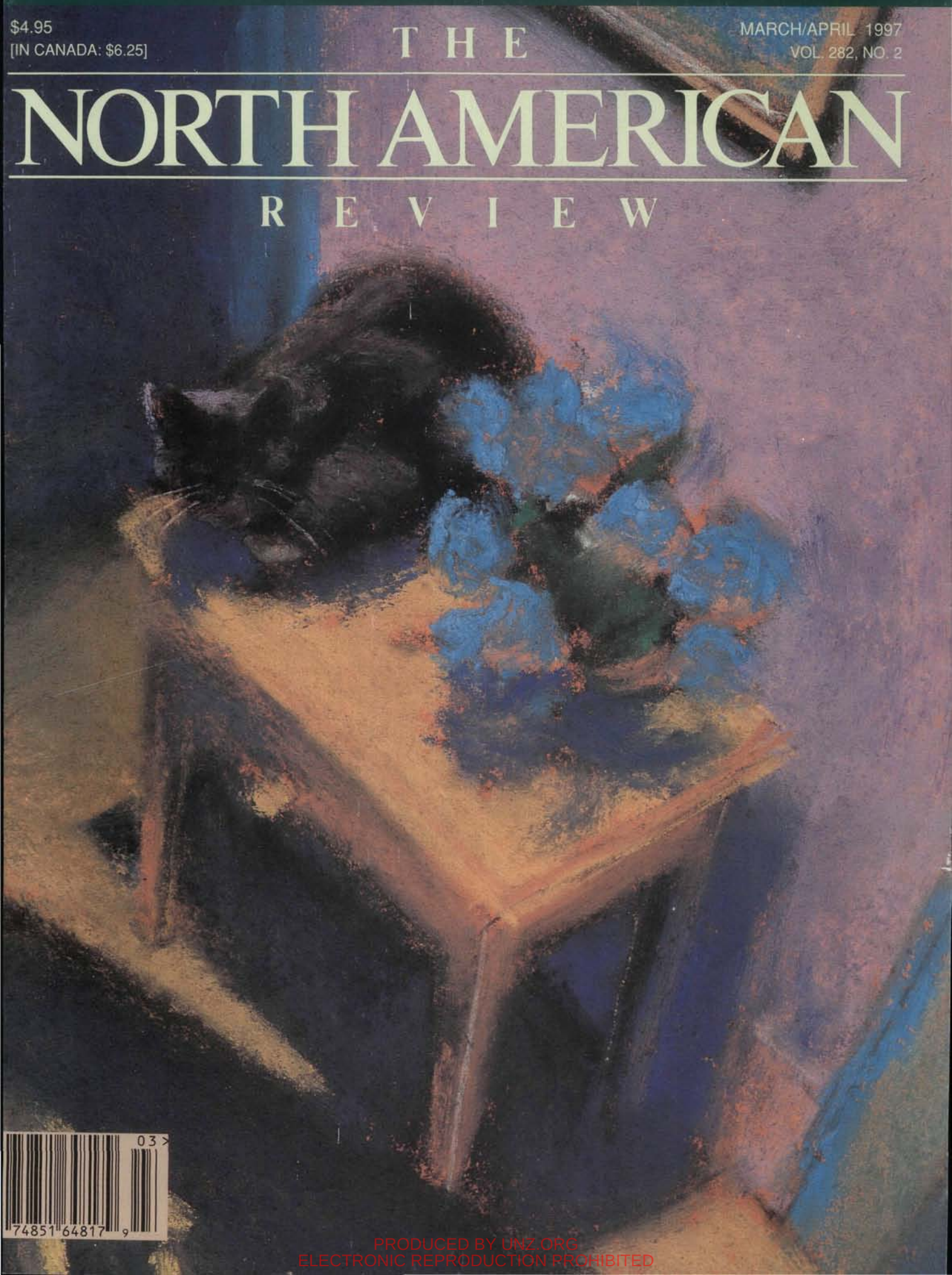

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Don't muddy up the googol.*

*Googol: The largest number of things that has a name. Webster defines it as the number one followed by a hundred zeroes.

There are googols of little creatures squiggling and burrowing, flitting and squishing under the mud, through the swamps and over the sandy marshes. Sea squirts, copepods, lugworm larvae and the babies of little fish. Each with a kind of a brain, each with the breath of life. But their life is ebbing. And as they start to go—you do, too.

You are standing on the threshold of time in as sacred a place as any in the world. It's where the life of the water and the life of the land converge in biological blur. These are the wetlands—the swamps and the mudflats that sometimes smell like rotten eggs. These are the marshes, clogged with weeds, swarming with bugs, teeming with beautiful life. This is where the moon moves the water in shallow ebbs and floods; where the sun pierces down to the ooze and the nutrients flow in a strange and marvelous way. Nowhere else except here in these sopping grounds is there so much life in so much concentration. But the life is dwindling. And as these lands start to go—you do, too.

These squishy, mushy lands are where most of our fish are born, the fish that feed the fish that feed the fish that fill the sea. These narrow strips of estuarine land are where the birds come to rest and nest and feed; and they are tied inexorably to the life support for the raccoons and the bears and the deer a hundred miles away. And to you.

In California, most of the wetlands are already gone. In Florida, they're going fast. Once there were 127 million acres of interior and coastal wetlands. Now forty per cent are gone, the precious specks of life in these treasured lands exchanged for yacht clubs and marinas and industrial growth. As we dredge the bays and fill the marshes and cover the mud with asphalt; as we spray our poisons and scatter our waste and spew oil upon the waters—we destroy forever the great forces of life that began millennia ago.

But now we have gone too far. Because this planet belongs not only to us but to them as well. To the umpteen zillion other things that fly in the sky and roam on the land and swim in the sea and burrow beneath our feet.

Now, especially now, if we will only stop to think—perhaps we will think to stop.

Sierra Club

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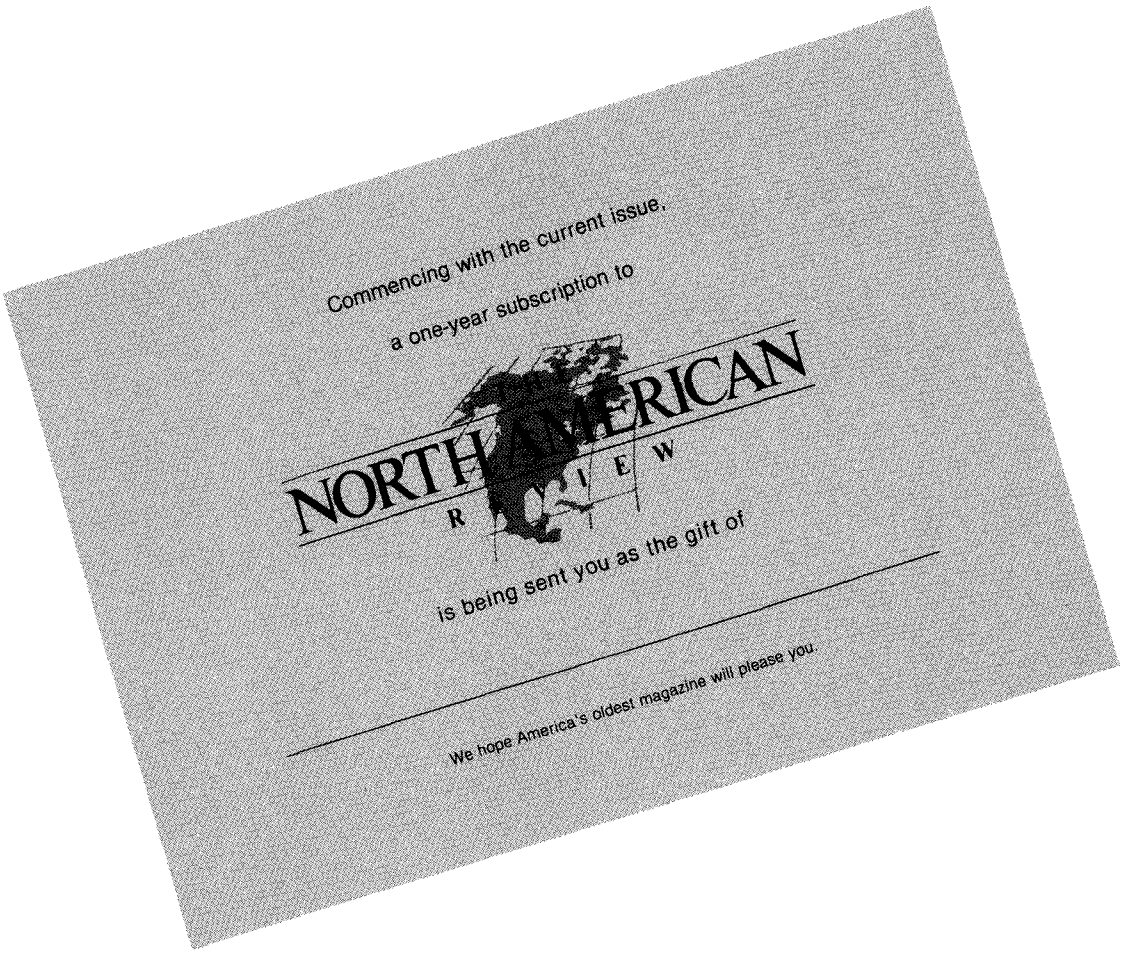
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THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW. SINCE 1815.

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

We live in an age of meticulous impropriety, in which actions and behaviors are carried out not with attention to ethics or morals or decent precedent, but only to legalisms and judicial technicality. Matters have so far declined that even to elect to the Presidency the lesser of two evils is not to avoid falling into the trap of perhaps having endorsed the greater after all. If we truly lived up to the earlier days of this magazine, when we were "the old North" and fond of ruminating on incidents of political chicanery, our pages would no doubt be carrying polemics against Gingrich on the right and Clinton on the left(?) and Inside-the-Beltway in all directions—but we are, gratefully, more lit'r'y nowadays and our claws trimmed if not pulled. *Ars longa*, we tell ourselves and our readers; *vita brevis est.*

With that in mind, we feature in this number of the NAR the brief biography of Adelbert Ames II by Roy R. Behrens—a biography of quirky intelligence and lively visual imagination. Further, new fiction from George V. Higgins, an old friend of the NAR since the late 'sixties, when he was scarcely known; equally new stories from Peter Cherches and Lucia Nevai. Finally, the usual departments, unusual poetry, and a pot pourri under the banner of "unclassifieds." Read and savor.

Of note: Richard Jackson's "The Poem That Was Once Called 'Desperate' but Is Now Striving to Become the Perfect Love Poem" has been selected for inclusion in *The Best American Poetry 1997* (Touchstone).

A last reminder that in May we will publish a "double issue" to see our readers through the hot summer —the emphasis on short stories—then resume our usual bi-monthly pattern in September. Some of the authors represented are listed in the announcement on page 49.

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■

The Weather Channel

STEVEN VINCENT

"[T]he whole of the visible universe is only a storehouse of images. . .that the imagination must digest and transform."
—Baudelaire

"He is the father you will never quite manage to kill."
—Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

MY FATHER HAS DISCOVERED The Weather Channel. You know, the 24-hour cable station dedicated to nothing but—well...weather? Rain in Madagascar, blizzards in Tibet, drought in Santa Fe, my father takes them all in with the same enthusiasm he once exhibited watching sports.

"Gonna be clear and sunny today!" he'll announce, eyes fixed on the Channel's radar map of the Bay Area, its scratchy green blotches representing overcast, as if some Chernobyl-like disaster were spewing radioactivity across Northern California. "Good day to work in the yard!"

Northern California is where I'm from, and where my parents still live—in the same house, actually, in which I grew up. The town is named Sunnyvale, a suburb of San Jose that forms the virtual heart of Silicon Valley. Outside of a couple of trips to Portland, Oregon, my parents haven't left the area in years. Instead, like many retired people, they fill their days with hobbies, gardening, social clubs—or else, like my 68-year old father, watch mid-day re-runs of "Perry Mason," surfing back to The Weather Channel during station breaks like a kid making furtive raids on a cookie jar.

"You checked the weather a few minutes ago," I comment one mid-February afternoon, during a visit from New York.

"Just curious about what's going on in San Francisco," he replies, or something to that effect.

True, the weather throughout the Bay Area can be squirrelly at times, with wide discrepancies in temperature and wind velocity between the northern and southern ends of the peninsula; and of course, there's the fog. And maybe my father feels a need to know about these things that I don't understand. Maybe that's why I come downstairs each morning, only to find him awake, sitting in his bathrobe, San Jose *Mercury News* in hand, watching The Weather Channel.

"The northwest is getting hit with floods," he reports, gesturing with the remote at a news feed from Oregon. Then, craning his neck toward the kitchen, where my mother is making coffee, "Isabel!" he shouts. "The hotel we stayed at in Portland is filled with three feet of water!"

"Oh no!" my mother hollers back.

"I can't believe you watch this shit," I grumble, snatching the paper off his lap.

Up until that trip to California, I'd always hated weather-related news. When a hurricane threatened the Florida coast, I'd groan, dreading the next two weeks of interminable news stories about houses blown off their foundations, people stranded in Red Cross shelters, plucky survivors joining together in a time of crisis, inevitable FEMA screw-ups. But worse than hurricanes—which at least can provide dramatic film footage—were *floods*. The slow, inexorable rising of water; townspeople, National Guardsmen and inmates from nearby prisons desperately stacking sandbags to prevent some river or other from cresting; endless shots of houses floating downstream like weird river barges—who outside of those living in the affected areas really cared? To me, weather was meaningless. It couldn't be construed as anything other than what it was. It was the thing-itself; it symbolized nothing. Like life, it just *happened*.

But that was before my father introduced me to The Weather Channel.

"Gonna be 70 here today," he observes.

"It's 70 here every day," I reply, skimming the *Merc*'s op-ed page.

That's true, too. Almost. Situated about 50 miles south of San Francisco, San Jose enjoys weather that is about as resident-friendly as you can find in the continental United States. That's how I spent my childhood, in one gentle, humidity-free, picture-perfect day after another. No surprises, either: in San Jose, the weather you wake up with is generally the weather you have all day—unlike New York, where a beautiful morning can turn into a late afternoon monsoon without warning. Like Heaven, or the steady-state theory of entropy, conditions in Silicon Valley rarely change.

It took me until the end of my most recent visit to Sunnyvale to discover what my father actually *saw* in The Weather Channel. To be truthful, it took a political argument. For over 20 years, I've argued politics with my father. He's an Omaha-born former auditor for the U.S. General Accounting Office, with a Goldwater conservatism as rock-ribbed as it is soul-deep. Usually beginning with a simple discussion of current events,

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we invariably plunge into a fierce zero-sum disputation where the object is not just to establish the "truth," but to demonstrate that the other's entire epistemological orientation is as ludicrous as fins on a cat. A father-son thing, I guess. These contests, however, inevitably leave me feeling the exasperated loser. For some reason, when I argue with my father, concepts which I normally articulate with the glib surety of a William Buckley stumble out of my mouth like Bowery drunks, while my dearest convictions sound as shrill as the rantings of a street-corner prophet. But on this particular occasion, events went differently. On this occasion, I remembered—The Weather Channel.

"Whenever I come back to Sunnyvale I feel like I'm stepping into a time warp," I venture one morning as we stroll through Serra Park. Three or four times a week, my father sets off from the house and walks through the local park—named, with some political incorrectness, it now turns out, after the 18th century Spanish cleric, California mission founder and alleged enslaver of Native Americans, Father Junipero Serra. Continuing along some neighborhood side streets, he then passes near my old high school and enters a 7-Eleven, where he buys a cup of self-serve coffee and trades pleasantries with the clerk. Round trip, about a mile.

"It's amazing how little the neighborhood has changed in 35 years," I add, noting, however, the large number of Asians performing early-morning *tai chi* exercises in the park: Vietnamese immigrants, settling into low-rent apartments nearby.

"Nobody moves," replies my father, wearing baggy jeans, a pale blue "Villa Hotel, San Mateo, California" windbreaker and a red and white baseball cap reading

Red Rooster Grill
Best Food Around
Iowa Falls, Iowa

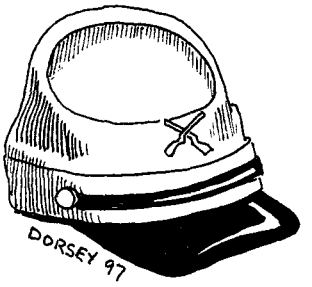
—a retirement outfit so bedraggled a county outreach worker in the park one morning mistook him for a homeless man. "They just keep their homes and retire right here in Sunnyvale because the weather's so nice."

"The weather? More like Proposition 13," I scoff, referring to California's infamous 1978 referendum that permanently slashed property taxes for millions of state homeowners.

Irked by my sarcasm, "Let me remind you," the former C.P.A. responds, "that without Prop 13, taxes would have forced your grandmother in Palo Alto to sell the house she'd lived in for over 40 years."

We walk on. Annoyed by my father's underhanded appeal to family sentiments, "I'm not talking about evicting grandmothers," I begin again. The blood is rising. "I'm saying that no one leaves Sunnyvale because California homeowners pay absurdly low property taxes—meanwhile, their kids and grandkids' schools are falling apart because the state has no revenue!"

"Don't get me started on *schools*," my father growls, abruptly switching topics, a debate tactic that never fails to infuriate me. But at that moment, we approach the 7-Eleven. There, along a low stucco wall next to the convenience store's parking lot, a group of white teen-agers from the adjacent high school loiter defiantly: cigarettes, backward baseball caps, ghetto blaster blaring rap music. "Look at that shit," he hisses. "You think taxes are going to help schools when today's parents no longer bother to discipline their children?"



"Yes!" I angrily retort, pushing open the 7-Eleven's door. A sign taped to the glass reads, *NO MORE THAN 5 STUDENTS ALLOWED INSIDE AT ONE TIME.* "Instead of blaming parents, why don't you blame the *Capitalist system* for undermining family unity by forcing mothers and fathers to both work just to make ends meet?"

My father winks at the clerk. "My son, out from New York."

"Schools nowadays have to shoulder many of the parenting tasks that families used to do," I declaim, grabbing a carton of grapefruit juice for myself as my father pours us each a cup of coffee. "That means they need expanded programs and facilities and bigger budgets and—no thanks," turning down his offer of a jelly doughnut, "—more money, and that means higher taxes and a repeal of that damn Proposition 13!"

My father pays for the coffee and my juice, then chats with the clerk for a few minutes. Gazing out the window, I look at the teen-agers. They don't seem much more indolent than my friends and I did at that age. Still, the whole concept of *teen-agers* is one reason my wife and I opted not to have children. . .

"It started during World War II," my father continues, resuming our conversation as we walk across the 7-Eleven's parking lot, coffee in hand, rap thudding behind us. "Suddenly, women working in factories got a taste of life outside the house. Now, fifty years later, women in *your* generation would rather have 'careers' and 'economic equality' and 'find themselves' than stay home and raise their goddamned children."

That does it. Back in New York, I'm hardly considered a liberal, let alone a feminist. But there's something about exposure to my father's parochialism that so agitates me I can't help but sound like Elizabeth Cady Stanton at a Socialist rally. "Why don't you look at the real problem?" I snap. "Old farts like you who refuse to pay their fair share of taxes! Stop exonerating middle-class greed by blaming everything on women, or parents, or the moon and the stars and the weather and—"

The weather? I pause. Hey!

"*That's* why you watch The Weather Channel!" I cry, nearly dropping my coffee cup. "It's your view of life, presented for public viewing! A world without politics or bourgeois class interests or the

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"Maybe I just wanna see if it'll be a good day to work in the yard," my father replies with an innocent shrug.

Ho, ho. But it ain't that simple. It *can't* be. Actually, my father's fascination with The Weather Channel is quite complex, I realize. Call it a *nostalgia for the irrational:* a yearning for a world where nature—and not the cacophonous demands of women, the poor, minorities—reigns supreme: a kind of cosmic monarchy where Enlightenment rationality is superseded by an absolute natural order. Weather fascism! Until recently, sports provided him with this retreat into the natural. But with their increasing politicization—the strikes and free agents and enormous salaries and owners moving franchises at the drop of a stadium bond-issue—the purity and naturalness of the games are gone. What's left but weather?

"What'll you do when *man-made* conditions like smog and acid rain and ozone depletion and the greenhouse effect start really affecting the weather?" I ask, eager to see how far I can push this new-found advantage. "Are you still going to be so interested in weather when political controversy becomes part of the forecast?"

"Hopefully," my father answers, a touch of weariness in his voice, "I won't be around to see that."

The epiphany leaves me basking for several hours in a moralistic glow. It's as if, like Voltaire, I've unmasked the chicanery of the *ancien régime*. And in a sense, I have. For as postmodern critical theory teaches us, dominant elites—be they ruling classes or opinionated fathers—thrive by convincing the dominated that their authority is synonymous with the "eternal," the "transcendent," the "natural order of things." It's the secret prestidigitation of power: translate your own class or personal interests into "mythic" values and you relegate whatever is not-you to the limbo of silence and insignificance. "[M]yth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal," writes Roland Barthes. With myth, nature kills politics; with myth, God consumes history like Saturn devouring his children; with myth, you've got my father scotching a losing political debate by declaring, "In the end, what does it matter? Because of technology and feminism, women will someday stop having babies and the human race will eventually become extinct." Take it from me, I know.

Or at least I thought I knew. Within a few hours after my return from the 7-Eleven, however, The Weather Channel offered up another revelation. One I'm still mulling over. One about me.

It started in the backyard of the house. Now, to be fair, my father *does* spend many hours doing "yard work." And in truth, possessed with the greenest of thumbs, he's filled his three-quarter-acre patch of land—bordered, western suburb-style, by six-foot redwood fences—with hundreds of flowers, shrubs and trees, including cypress, Chinese elm, bamboo, olive, avocado, orange, grapefruit, lemon, tangerine, persimmon, kumquat, guava, walnut, apple and pear trees (this is, after all, California). He's done this for as long as I can remember—fingers on his left hand are bent arthritically from years of tree pruning—and the various landscaping tasks are even more important now that he's retired and less physically active. And in his own way, I suppose, he approximates Barthes' image of the farmer "who does not speak about the weather, he 'acts it,' he draws it in his labor."

"Last year I had peaches the size of softballs," he relates, inspecting his various stone-fruit trees, barren now in February, as I trail behind. "I had so many peaches they were coming out my kiester."

"What d'you think of Newt Gingrich?" I ask—yes, I admit, try-

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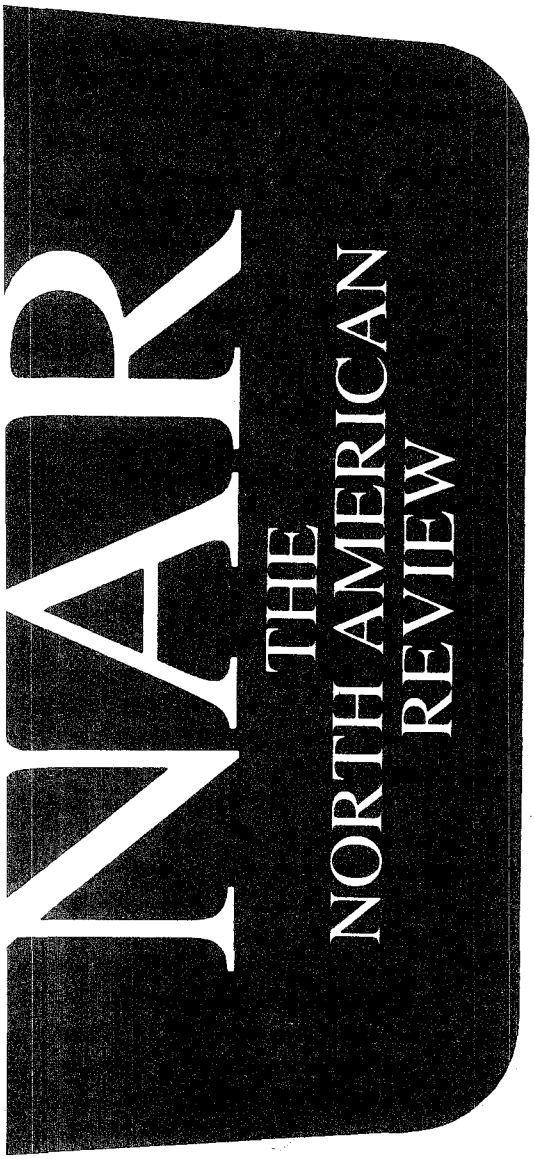
ing to ambush him in another political discussion.

"Ehhhh," examining a pair of 20-year old plum trees he's contemplating uprooting, as they've grown unproductive with age, "he's a whore, like most of 'em in Congress. Hand me that pruner, will you?"

"But he wants to dismantle the



as always, a sense of dismay—alarm may be more accurate—compels me to balance my father's assertions by articulating what he disregards and leaves unsaid.

"*Ste*-ven," exasperation crossing his face—well, I did ask for it—"where do you get this 'Capitalism' shit? Capitalism isn't perfect, but it's the best economic system mankind has yet devised. And you know why?" He leans the pruning shears against the wall of a small storage shed and begins walking toward the house. "Because it provides social order by regulating the most basic drives of human nature"—pause for effect—"*the desire to gouge your fellow man!*"

Another categorical assertion! Distressed by my father's obstinacy, "'Human nature' is a myth!" I cry, ' lowing him into the house. 'n you cite 'human nature,' guise the role that bourgeois structures have in molding 's thoughts and personalities! e Marx said, 'The evil a man just a reflection of his eco-environment!'"

on't give a damn what Marx my father rejoins, moving e kitchen, where he opens a rd and pulls out a scrunched- of Wonder bread. "Are you ; me it's *Capitalism's* fault guy holds up a liquor store ls the owner, like what hap- the other day in East Palo

talking about—"

lucing a jar of peanut butter, ou telling me that human aren't motivated primarily by of 'me and mine first'?"

I'm saying is—"

next, followed by a bag of chips. "Man, I feel sorry for t your age, not to know the f human nature! Must be all nulticulturalism' crap you Too bad. Hey, it's almost time for 'Perry Mason'!"

n't know what enrages me my father's condescending ad," or his patronizing dis- of our argument in favor of a r old TV show whose every de he's seen a thousand times. In any case, I'm furious. And flustered. A dozen snappy retorts spring to mind, only to collide like Keystone Kops on my tongue. Why do I always become so inarticulate around my father? I wonder. Why do I say things I'm not sure I completely believe? Suddenly, as I slip into the endless tape-loop of self-analysis and doubt, Voltaire's *allégresse* disappears.

And that's where The Weather Channel comes in.

Bearing his peanut-butter and grape jelly sandwich, a mountain of potato chips, Oreo cookies and glass of milk (!)—his normal luncheon fare—my father settles into a chair and remotes-on the TV. Circling behind him, "The life of the retiree," I snicker, "one long 'world-o'-Saturdays.'" Sarcasm: the last resort of the unpersuasive. Ignoring me, he surfs to cable's meteorological extravaganza. Scenes from Oregon fill the screen: stop signs a foot or two above water level, people traveling through downtown business districts in rowboats, abandoned pick-ups filled with brackish sludge—the Willamette River, overflowing its banks to inundate half a state.

"Army Corps of Engineers built a whole system of dams to tame the Columbia River," my father grunts through a mouthful of peanut-butter. "Guess no one expected the Willamette to jump its banks."

A world o' regulation: after 30 years as a G.A.O. auditor, that's what my father sees on the TV screen. And what do I see? Nothing. With no immediate relevance to my own life, the pictures of the Willamette flood loiter uselessly about my consciousness like teenagers outside a 7-Eleven. Oregon? What's that to me? A word, a name, a signifier with no significance. And yet for some reason the news feed fascinates me; as vexed as I am by my father's condescension, I linger beside him, hooked by pictures of the destructive power of unregulated nature. Soon, I've forgotten my pique. It's as if (and this is something I concluded only weeks after the fact), the images present to my unconscious mind an objective picture of myself: how my narrow, full-of-prejudice, all-too-human ego chokes the flow of spiritual and emotional energies from the Self, allowing but a fraction to pass while the rest pours chaotically, without conscious control, around and through me. Some of that unregulated flood is my "dark" side, my own petty, fearful, guilt-ridden little Caliban I loathe to accept; but some, too, is my "light" side, the larger, more com-

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prehensive angel-self infused with an energy that makes it equally frightening to accept—love.

The "Perry Mason" theme rolls out of the TV: ominous horns and turgid piano chords invoking Old Testament moralism and the surety of just retribution. "Alriiight, we've got an early one today," my father exclaims, able within seconds to identify the approximate year of any episode of the famous lawyer series. Excitedly, he pats a chair beside him. "Why don't you stay and watch this with me?" I love "Perry Mason." And I love watching old re-runs of the show with my father. A moment later, all thoughts of our argument forgotten, I slide into the chair and begin to watch what certain New York acquaintances might call a bourgeois myth of engendered justice dispensed in a white, male-dominated power structure. But for me, it's as if time has reversed some 30 years. Once more I'm a crew-cut little boy, watching TV with Dad—whose hair is dark, whose fingers are straight and who is younger than I am today.

MY FLIGHT BACK to New York leaves San Francisco at seven a.m.

Just after dawn, I come downstairs, showered, packed, dressed and oddly feeling all my 40 years. My parents are already awake and dressed themselves, mother in a neat pair of slacks and sweater, father in ill-fitting jeans, a faded workshirt and another baseball cap, this one reading

D.H. Wynn
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—the "happy shitbag look," as he puts it, of the suburban retiree.

And they're watching The Weather Channel.

"Gonna be 70 today!" my father booms out. "Good day to prune!"

I joke, "Mom's going to have to get a v-chip to prevent you from becoming any more addicted to that channel." But it's forced. As much as I look forward to returning to New York, it's always hard to say good-bye to my parents.

"We just heard your boy Gingrich on CNN and he was saying—"

But no, no; I'm not in the mood to talk politics. Instead, I look at my parents seated before me, freezing their images in my memory, as if that could halt the passage of time. Funny how I haven't noticed it before, but they've gotten grayer since my last visit; older and more frail. Although their health is good and financial condition solid, it's this frailty that worries me. So much chaos in the world! Not for the first time, I'm grateful that they live in Silicon Valley. Despite changes in the area—Vietnamese immigrants, Father Serra no longer a good guy, disintegrating schools— life in that middle-class sprawl is safe and secure, protected by a prosperous computer industry and, yes, Proposition 13. . .

"Looks like you'll have a clear flight all the way to New York," my father declares. Sigh. My old man, once again inserting himself into my business, this time using The Weather Channel. I have an urge to shut the damn thing off. But I'm suddenly struck by the sight of my father staring intently at a weather map of the United States. It's not only a desire to maintain the illusion of patriarchal omnipotence he's feeling here, I realize, he's also genuinely concerned about my safety flying home. So concerned, in fact, that he's reading the auguries of the Weather God.

What would Barthes say? To my father at this moment, the sweeping arrows, giant ovals, oversized capital letters and gauze-like clumps of white embellishing The Weather Channel's map are the weather, in the same sense that, to a believer, a primitive icon or fetishistic object actually embodies a spiritual presence. Like some modern pagan, my steadfastly irreligious father is petitioning the weather deity to grant his son a safe journey home. I'm touched, but at the same time saddened. For it's not just my existence that concerns him. It's both his and my mother's as well. Like Philemon and Baucis they are old and together and facing their final years. And gradually, through weather-graphics, my father is turning his attention away from the world of taxes and government works projects to the eternal powers gathering ever closer around him and his wife. Envisioning the end of life, he is looking beyond life. It's not the weather that he's ultimately searching for on The Weather Channel, but God.

"Gonna be 45 degrees when you land in New York," he adds. Yes, yes. But this is why, in the end, I can never totally unmask the patriarchal illusion in which, Oz-like, he envelops himself; why, always, just before the knockout punch, I stumble: unconsciously, I want to preserve that illusion, for it serves as a bond that joins us together. To "deconstruct" it entirely—to no longer remain at least partially complicit in the maintenance of my father's authority—would be to render inexpressible my love for him, I fear, and, by association, my love for my mother as well. For the myths, cultural assumptions and subjective interpretations that my parents and I share form the narrative with which we articulate love itself. To uphold and protect this narrative, to pledge troth on some level to the mythic, the depoliticized, the eternal, is to love. For love, then, I sacrifice a portion of myself; for love, I occasionally miss the mark, fumble in the clinch, turn away at the critical moment. To an ideologue, love is a prison; for the revolution to succeed, love must perish. But however much the admission may pain me, I am not a revolutionary; I am a son. And in the end, I heed my myths and the cosmic pulse of the blood. Like the weather, they are eternal. Like floods, they know no bounds. And like love, they bind us to our work, our families and our God.

My father switches off the TV. "We've just got time to beat the morning rush hour traffic and get to the airport," he says. □

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Call for entries

The North American Review
Fourth Biennial
Cover Competition

How to Enter
Do not submit the original work. Send a 35mm slide transparency, clearly marked with the artist's name, mailing address, and phone number. Indicate front and top of work. Please enclose an entry blank (photocopy O.K.) and, if you want the slide returned, a self-addressed stamped envelope. Send all entries to:

Cover Contest
The North American Review
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls IA 50614-0516

Deadline
All entries must be postmarked no later than 1 November 1997.

Competition

Graphic designers, illustrators, printmakers, and other visual artists (professionals and students) are invited to compete in the illustration or design of the cover of The North American Review. The winning entry will be used as the cover of the March/April 1998 issue of the magazine.

Guidelines

Entries may be carried out in any medium or combination of media, in any colors with the exception of metallic or fluorescent pigments. (No photographs, please.) Entries must be the proportion of the cover of the *NAR* (8 1/8 inches wide by 10 7/8 inches high). To facilitate color separation, the original artwork should measure no wider than 19 inches and no higher than 25. All entries must anticipate the contrast required for the superimposition of the magazine logo across the top portion of the illustration.

All styles of illustration, design and fine arts are welcomed and encouraged. All entries must be the original work of the person who enters the competition. Each person may submit only one entry.

Fees and Awards

There are no entry fees. The winner of the competition will receive a check for $300, published credit, a one-year subscription to the *NAR* and 50 tear sheets of the finished cover.

Judging
Final judge for the competition will be Gary Kelley, internationally-known illustrator and cover art director of the *NAR*.

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Landmark Theater May Shut Down

A Story by George V. Higgins

Vernon Goff concedes that what he is doing, selling the Strand Theater, long a regional landmark, carries with it as many fear a strong likelihood that it will soon close down again, this time for good.

"The agreement that I have with Finch Brothers says that they'll make reasonable efforts, consistent with good business practices, to keep it operating. They call it 'a mini-galleria conversion,' so if they do that it'll have to be a smaller version. A sort of midget bijou, boutique theater, vest-pocket size, along with the arcade shops and the café bistro. But they haven't really promised that they're going to do that. They can't. They're not in the same position I've been in these past twenty-three years. They're a big corporation, run properties all over the country, Canada, too. They're closely-held, sure; only a few people own shares. But they've still got those stockholders to reckon with, and I don't care who they are, family or not, those people expect their shares to pay dividends. That's how they got to be wealthy.

"I've always been in a different position. I could do whatever I liked. Only had myself to account to; never had anyone else." He laughed. "If I had I probably never would've gone into the business. But I never gave anyone a chance to talk me out of it. ask anyone for advice. It was completely my own decision. I was twenty-nine when I did it, and basically what it amounted to was that I decided one fine day to spend the rest of my life at the movies.

"I knew what I was doing. I went into the kingdom of illusion without any illusions at all. All I could ever really expect to get out of it was a lifetime of hard work and not very much money to show for it. To most people it didn't look like a very mature or a wise thing to do, and even though I've managed most of these years to make a living out of it, maybe they were right. But it made a lot of sense to me at the time.

"Movies'd always been, far and away, what I'd always *liked* the best of everything I did. Anything that had anything to do with going to the movies. The courses that I took in the college about film, its history and so forth: those were by far the ones I liked the best. The people that I guess were my friends at school—I haven't seen much of them since: All of them were convinced William Faulkner or James Joyce was the greatest thing that ever came down the pike. D.W. Griffith was my choice. Him or Orson Welles. And actually *being* at the movies, sitting at them in the dark, but feeling as though where you *really* were was actually with all the people up there you were watching on the screen: that was the best part of all.

"So when the idea of doing it first crossed my mind, the only thing I couldn't really figure out was why on earth I hadn't thought of it before. It was so obvious, you know? Such a perfectly natural *thing*. '*Of course* I

WILLIAM FRANCIS BISBEE

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should be doing that—what I should've been doing all along, 'stead of wasting my time on all that other stuff.' It was where I really belonged.

"Why did it take me so long ? And what brought it on? I would've said then: 'I don't know.' It was nineteen-seventy-three. I was two years out of law school, UConn, and one day I just said 'the hell with this.' Made up my mind to chuck the whole thing. All the big plans I'd made; the education that I'd worked so long and hard to get: threw it all away. Certainly nobody told me to do it, but nobody tried to stop me either.

"Several were kind enough to tell me," he said, laughing again, "tell me right to my face, that they thought I'd gone out my mind." He winked. "My dear father of unhappy memory: In what I assure you was for him a very rare attack of sensitivity and compassion, he told me I must be crazy.

"But I'd made up my mind. I went through with it. Gave up on the bar exam once and for all. Stopped looking for a phony law job that'd let me sort of *pretend* to be a lawyer 'til I really could become one, provided I'd agree to do what amounted to cleaning latrines for the real lawyers. Put every last penny into it. A little over thirteen grand; what I had left from what Grandpa Peter left me, after law school and the bar reviews. Doesn't sound like much today, but it wasn't small change in those days. And *still* I had nerve enough, on top of that, to go and borrow twenty-nine thousand dollars more from Mason Turner, over at Pioneer Trust. 'Looking for trouble on borrowed money': that's what he said I was doing.

"Good old Mason, though, God bless him. Looked like your classic mean bastard of a banker—and he was that, no question. But behind that stony face was a man before his time. All he cared about was money. Who you were or what you did, or who you did it with: didn't matter to him. If you came to him looking to borrow money and he thought what you wanted it for was going to wind up making money for his bank along with you, that was all there was to it. Your name might just as well've been Polly Adler and your business could've been a whorehouse, but if he thought it'd be a money-maker, fine; Mason'd lend you the money.

"Those who didn't think I was nuts thought I was being pigheaded. I didn't argue with them. Forty-two thousand American dollars, to buy an old movie theater that'd gone out of business eight years before that? There'd been a good reason for that: nobody went to it anymore. I was foolish to think that I could ever make a go of it, and when I insisted on going ahead with it anyway, after tons of good advice not to, *well*, that's the sort of conduct that's given obstinacy a bad name.

"Like I say, no argument from me. I thought they were right, the people who told me that. Still do, in fact, far as that goes. Point was, though, that *I* was right, too. It was what I wanted to do."

What he had done with the money was buy, renovate and beautifully-refurbish the old Strand Theatre and the stately white-trimmed, yellow, two-story, wooden building, *1907* carved into the white scrolled oval at the top of the façade, that it occupied on the eastern side of the green in Canterbury. He put in new heat; rebuilt the air conditioning; installed fancy lighting fixtures that looked delicately-gilded but were durably-anodized; and reupholstered the seats in stain-resistant red crushed-velvet, vehicle-upholstery grade, a lot tougher than it looked. "If we gave buildings names like we do people, when they reach a certain age, the Strand would be a dowager. A very *dignified* dowager, commanding the utmost respect."

He had gone to all that work despite his knowledge that the day would almost certainly come when he'd find himself "being ushered" unceremoniously out of the movie business—he often called it "show biz," sardonically—a lot faster than he'd gotten into it. "I expected to get the bum's rush," he said. "The only reason that didn't happen was because I've been very lucky finding niches for myself. The way I chose films was by picking movies I'd like to see. That for some reason or other weren't being shown around here. People would come from miles around to see them, up from Connecticut, down from Vermont and even out here from Rhode Island. Because where they lived there wasn't any place where they could see them either. Not even on TV, where they're just not the same; never mind on a big screen like they could at the Strand. Well, *Lawrence of Arabia* was one. In my old ark of a building, I've been able on a regular basis to do something almost no one else can do anymore: I've been able to show Cinemascope, real movies in Cinemascope, the way they were meant to be seen.

"But I never thought it would last forever. The Strand could survive only as long as the big national chains allowed it to. The day their marketing bean-counters saw census figures showing enough people with uncommitted discretionary income in the Canterbury market to justify the cost of a cookie-cutter multiplex would be the day before the bulldozers moved in at Northside Mall. The usual, simple formula; people're all so very stupid, it always works, every time. Ballyhoo a half a dozen first-run, third-rate movies; show 'em four times a day on tiny screens; twenty minutes after they open in New York; to thirty or forty mindless boobs at a time. Charge those nitwits two and a half or three times what they'll pay to get into my place, plus a buck or two for a big cup of Coca-Cola flavored ice chips and two or three more for popcorn. Nothing to it; park an armored truck beside the ticket window. They'll trample each other to get through the

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door, and you'll have to vacuum the cash up. Even if I happen to be showing a better movie, *and they know it*, they won't have any money left or time to spend to see it.

"So my days've always been numbered. I've had to scramble like mad; use every gimmick I've been able to think up; grin-and-bear costs going steadily *up* and receipts going steadily down, in order to stay big-screen—and it's cost me. But it's also been the only way I've been able to stay in business: my refusing to put up a partition and divide the house into two—or maybe even *three*—teeny itsy-bitsy screens is what makes my theater different. It's the only reason people still have to come.

"But the question now's become: 'How much longer can I do this ?' It's been hard work, you know ? I'm getting a little winded. The fact I knew it'd be hard when I started out hasn't made it any easier.

"In fact one of my friends said the fact that I always knew how it'd end, before I started, and did it anyway, was typical of me, 'Vernon being Vernon, perverse as usual.' I said I prefer to think of it as being contrary. Much better to be a contrarian than a pervert. But the explanation really was that I was no longer afraid.

"My stinker of a father always told me that the man you've got to look out for's the one who's finally discovered that he really doesn't give a shit what happens to him. When he's done that he's set himself free. He can do anything he wants, and no matter what happens he's sure to have a good time. By the time I was twenty-nine, I'd become that man. I wanted to have a good time. I thought I deserved to have one, after all I'd been through.

"I didn't say that to Mason Turner when I got the loan. I wasn't completely candid with him. To him I talked strictly business. But having a good time was my biggest motive when I lighted up the old barn again." First he'd had to rescue it from the effects of the eight years of vacancy, chill mustiness and damp mildewed neglect. The previous owner-operators, a husband-and-wife team, had grown old and tired, enough so that they'd discouraged each other from gambling the time and money that repairs and improvements too long deferred would beguile the residents of Canterbury into going out to the movies again. "So when they had no luck quickly finding an eager buyer, they'd already primed themselves to conclude sadly that they'd never find one. They pronounced the business dead and closed it down. Retired to Florida."

The price of a business become defunct is a lot less than the price of even an obviously-ailing but going concern. Their pessimistic and hasty decision was what put the Strand within Vernon Goff's reach. He said that didn't mean he hadn't been pretty scared when he did it. "But I was turning thirty. I felt as though I had to do something pretty soon if I was ever going to do anything." The Strand had begun to look like what he wanted out of life.

The business appealed to him. It was almost cheap enough for him to buy—"not really in my price range, but if I could resign myself to a lifetime of genteel penury, always *just about* making it, *almost* getting by, it would be close enough." It *might* even yield a modest profit—"if by chance somebody passed through town some day and decided that he simply *had* to have that particular piece of property, just couldn't *live* without it and'd pay anything to get it; someone who in other words was even crazier'n I was. So far that hasn't happened."

Another important consideration—it would always be small enough for him to operate without needing much help or approval from anybody else.

"The first year I was open, 'seventy-four, I tried to get kids from the high school to work for me. The couple who'd sold it to me'd done it without hiring any help at all, but when I got in touch with them down there in Florida, they both told me they'd had a hard time of it, and there'd been two of them, keep in mind. So I had to do something. I figured getting the high schoolers'd be the cheapest way to do it, and believe me, that was important. If I could have them run the projectors; clean up around the place every night; sell the popcorn—handle things like that, and pay them the minimum wage. That way I'd be concentrating on the things that go into running the place, keeping accounts and booking the films.

"But pretty soon I had to see it just wasn't going to work, and hire students from the college. I had to pay them more money, but it balanced out because they showed up and did the work. I didn't need as many.

"With the high-schoolers there were 'way too many problems. Very unreliable. Wouldn't show up tonight, they decided they didn't feel like it; no call or anything. And then when they *did* show up? No explanation. I could've *killed* them. I'd look at them and say: '*Well*? Where were you, anyway?' And they'd get this hurt look on their faces and say: 'I didn't *feel* good.' Like that was supposed to do it, was going to be enough. Or they'd tell me their parents put their foot down, didn't want them staying out so late here on school nights. As though what they were now telling me, here, was that if they'd stayed home after supper, their parents would've made sure they were in bed before eleven. Which was ridiculous, expecting me to believe that. And even if it *had* been true, they still could've done it, been home in bed by eleven, and kept their job working for me. If they'd've gone straight home after they finished—as they didn't; none of them did.

"But of course I always suspected, anyway, it wasn't only that—what they said it was, their parents and their

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schoolwork. It was still a different time, a different climate then. There was more suspicion, a lot more. People had their eye on you; you could feel it. No one ever came right out and said something, but you were conscious of it all the time. You knew it. Always, in the back of your mind. Not that you'd ever actually *done* anything that would've given anyone a reason to stay away from you. Or that anybody ever came right out and claimed you had, either. But that feeling was always with you. The feeling was always there.

"The priest, especially. Several of the kids that I had come to work for me and who later quit, quite soon, on me, not *right* after they were hired but not too long afterwards, either, decided it just wouldn't work out—they were Catholics. Not too surprising, really; this's a heavily Catholic area. But I always kind of thought, well, that that was probably some of Father Mulready's work, over at Saint Jude's. Not that he ever came right out and actually *said* anything to me, anything like that. He was always perfectly correct with me, in every respect. Even when I booked a film he disapproved of and he felt he had to say something from the pulpit, tell his people not to come. He'd always make it a point to see to it that I was informed before he did it.

"Of course maybe what he had in mind was that if he called me first, I might not show the film that bothered him. Might have a change of heart. That thought did occur to me; that what he was really doing was seeing if he could threaten me, intimidate me to the point where I'd get so I wouldn't run anything he didn't like. But whatever it was, he'd either call me up, if he didn't see me on the street, and say to me something like, along the lines of: 'Well, I hope you understand now: I just have to do this. The archdiocese and all. Nothing personal. I know how they say times've changed, but I think we can both agree here, some things never will.'

"Well, as a matter of fact I *didn't* agree with him on that. This was now the Seventies; the times *had* changed, a lot. This wasn't still the Fifties then that we were in, and if he thought it was, well, nobody else did. And especially not where the movies were concerned. The Preminger films—*The Moon is Blue* probably the most: they'd taken care of most of that, censorship and so forth. But of course I always told him that I did, I understood, and that I hoped he understood that when a film came along that I felt I had to show, well then, I had to show it. Even if that meant he had to come out publicly and say he disapproved.

"I don't think he liked me thinking that way, talking like that to him. I don't think he was used to it, having people disagree. But I still came right out and said it to him. I tbought I had to, you know? Didn't want him thinking that I was afraid of him. You just cannot ever let people get the idea that you're afraid of them. Even if you are—*especially* if you are. That's just *fatal*, if you ever do that. But then I got so I really *didn't* mind, at all. After the first two or three times it finally dawned on me that when Father Mulready told the people in his parish not to come, it was good for business. Free publicity. And 'forbidden fruit': it's *sweeter*."

The debt service on the Pioneer Trust mortgage came to $261 a month. Twenty years at nine percent: the total he'd agreed to repay by the end of 1993 for the immediate use of that $29,000 would amount to $62,640. The sight of the figure on the papers that he'd signed hadn't really surprised him, but it made him catch his breath. Local real estate taxes added $85 a month to that. He'd had to sell 58 seats every week, 231 seats every four weeks, at the two-buck price that he charged then (minus 25 percent of gross for the second-run movies he usually featured; 266 seats if he "ran wild and ordered up a first-run film—35 percent of gross") just to meet those building costs, $346 a month.

Every day he had to make eleven dollars and sixteen cents just to hang onto the building. He got up every morning already down that amount before he insured the place or anything inside it, in the event disaster happened and it all burned down, got blown down or condemned before he got it paid for. He was short eleven bucks and change before he turned on a single forty-watt lightbulb or flushed a single toilet; switched on the projector; bought one giant bag of pre-popped corn or anything to butter it; or cooled or heated any space—including the creaky-floored gloomy four-room apartment on the second floor designed into the structure by the man who'd had it built, for the same reason Vernon lived in it himself: to save money; eleven bucks a day.

"The exterminator: Had to have him every month, ninety bucks a month. Vermin love the movies more'n we do. Roaches; mice; silverfish; and every now and then—not too often, though, thank God—you'd have a good-sized rat show up. Run across some woman's *foot*. Grit your teeth and make a few cheerful refunds *those* nights. Course you know what causes it. It's the people who complain about it; your customers attract them. It's way they eat, the filthy pigs, spilling their food on the floor? But you can't *tell* them that, of course—so there's nothing you can do."

His thriftiness came at a price. Regardless of how he happened to feel or what he might like to do of an evening—have a friend over for dinner or even just go to bed early to nurse a heavy cold—he not only had to allow in but welcome everyone who'd come out and paid a small amount of money to spend a few hours in what was not only Vernon Goff's business but also his home; talking loudly in the foyer as they came and went, coughing, moaning and making the seats groan during the movie, tramping up and down the stairs to the basement when they used the restrooms. Some

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nights when his feature attracted the young crowd from the colleges and the university, the audience took sides and the old building resounded, the kids clapping their hands when the hero appeared, booing and hissing the villain, laughing, whistling, shouting and stamping their feet, cheering when the good guys prevailed at the end.

"The James Bond movies," he said. "Those were never good nights to plan to settle in upstairs with a good book, or try to watch *Masterpiece Theater*. You might as well not bother; it was hopeless. You were sure to have your concentration broken time and time again. I tried to remind myself all those inconsiderate ruffians downstairs disturbing me were paying close to a thousand dollars for the privilege. Closer to fifteen, sixteen hundred, in fact, if it was either after I'd finally had no choice and'd gone up to three bucks all the time—which would've been in nineteen-ninety. Or before that when I saw a sure sell-out in a new release, like one of those James Bond epics, say, if I booked it first-run and didn't just allow the multiplexes down in Springfield to gobble up my market by default.

"I'd sit there in my office grinding my teeth, smelling the marijuana fumes, hearing the pop-tops when they opened the beers that were making them belch and fart in the dark. I'd be telling myself that by the time those noisy young whelps finished visiting and buying popcorn and candy and Coca-Cola from me, running up my water bill by constantly flushing the toilets, it seemed like continuously, either from seven until nine-thirty, or nine-forty-five 'til around midnight, if they'd filled the joint, I'd have about three thousand bucks more in my pocket than I'd had when I'd finished lunch that day. And I have to say that did help. It helped a lot. But they still got on my nerves, especially if I had the flu the night they thought was theirs to come and howl.

"And it wasn't just the loud kids, either. The older folks could be almost as annoying, in their own sweet way." The aromas of his chicken cacciatores, beef stews, spicy meatloafs and small pork roasts with apples —he'd managed to become a fairly decent cook, if he did say so, living by himself all those years—often penetrated the dry, porous ceilings and partitions, wafting through the building. Obtrusive patrons buying tickets to the early show at 7:00 to his stifled irritation smelled the sauces and the meats only partly masked by the smell of buttered popcorn and detected what he'd planned for supper. Then they snickered knowingly, as though their recognition of the smell of pot roast or whatever proved that they were pretty smart. "They were so damned *smug* about it, you know? 'Ham with honey pineapple tonight, Vern? Getting so you're a regular chef here. Better keep an eye on it, though; don't want it getting dried out.'

"I would've liked to say to them: 'Oh, why don't you go suck an egg, Elizabeth.' But I didn't, for the obvious reason. The people who make movies, act in them and direct them: They can afford to be arrogant, and from all the things you hear, I guess a good many of them are. But people who *show* movies: for us it's a different matter. If we know what's good for us, we keep a civil tongue.

"Not that it's any different for us than it is for any one in any other line of work where the nature of it is that you have to deal directly with the public, personally. You'd best keep your gripes to yourself. Complaining's just not a good idea. Your condescending customers didn't come to hear your troubles—particularly if they're the cause of them. They paid their way into your theater tonight so they won't have to think about their own problems for a few hours. What they want from you is to take their money, give them the right change, and shut up and show them the movie."

His tax bill rankled him each month when he paid it with the mortgage, but he never complained about that, either. It could've been a good deal higher, and he knew it. He'd gotten a break from Alice Cole in the assessors' office. She set the initial valuation at $34,000 when she could just well've made it $42,000, what the public records showed he'd put into the place. That would've cost him twenty bucks a month more—thirteen paid admissions, anywhere from a third to the whole of a slightly under-par weekend night's business —and he wouldn't've had a leg to stand on if he'd moved for an abatement. So when he ran into her one morning soon after he'd gotten the first bill and cursed it roundly, picking up the papers in Gentile's store, he said: "You did me a favor, I think. I appreciate it." She'd smiled, paying Ellen for her morning *Union* and said: "Well, you're a nice boy. Besides, the town should have a theater. And I do love the movies."

He said revivals on free TV must have contented her, if that was so. When he saw her obituary in the paper, a decade later, it made him stop and think; as best he could remember he'd seen her in the theater no more than four times. Two of her visits, he remembered, came on the same May weekend, in 1981. He'd booked the 1956 remake of *The King and I* with Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr. It had been one of the most successful selections he'd made for his all-time best promotional idea: the gratifyingly-popular 10th, 20th and 25th anniversary reprises of fondly-remembered films not quite legendary enough to have been withdrawn from theater rental for periodic re-release as classics—*Gone With the Wind*, for example; *Snow White* and *Cinderella*—but seldom revived on television or available on demand in video rental stores.

"Those days're *gone*," he said. "The stuff that dreams're made on: all vanished—into thin air. Only one of the reasons behind this decision that I'm making

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now, but a pretty big one, just the same. Yesterday you got the video store; you no longer had to wait for me to book your all-time favorite film, or hope your local UHF channel would decide to show it. Today the rental stores're obsolescent; you've got the all-movie channels for the oldies-but-goodies I used to bring back, and the pay-per-view channels for the second-runs that used to be my bread and butter.

"That's three big holes punched in the wall of my market niche where I've been hiding all of these happy years. Pretty soon you'll be able to sit in your living room and order up any movie you want from a satellite library, any time you want it. Then my little niche will be rubble, demolished. It won't exist anymore.

"It hasn't gotten quite that bad yet, though I have to admit for a few years now that's the impression I've been trying to give people. Taking a few liberties with the truth; sort of a tradition in show biz. Things're kindah bad? Make 'em a little bit worse. Frighten people into thinking if they personally don't start buying at least four tickets from me every week, the Strand'll disappear, and the whole tradition of the theater back at least to John Wilkes Booth'll vanish right along with it. Nothing like a guilt trip to drum up a little trade. They don't really know me. All I am to them's someone who does something or other to do with the movies. So they tell me how much they enjoy the American Movie Channel on their cable service. I look as gloomy as I can and say: 'Oh yes, I know, I know. I guess most people must feel that way. It's absolutely *killing* me, people in my end of the business.'

"It was more like conversation than conviction. Over the years I've gotten so what I believe is that people who want to go out to the movies do it. They go out to the movies. No matter what other leisure-time choices they have, moviegoers will always choose the movies. Always have and always will, no matter how things change. While the people who don't want to go to the movies, well, they just don't. Never have and never will, and nothing will change how they behave either, no matter what anyone does.

"There're probably just as many of the first kind now as there ever were, proportionately," he said, "but there's so many of the mall houses now that they've reached critical mass. They've got me surrounded. The one up in Hampton Pond, for example: in their ads they're bragging they're now 'dedicating,' that's the word they use, like it was a monument or something, one screen—out of eight, mind you: big deal—to the arty first-runs that *I* used to grab. Shakespeare plays and French flicks, Bergman movies: every single week I could. They weren't my subsistence, no; weren't enough for them for that. But when they came along, boy, they were rich desserts.

"No one else around here wanted them. I used to be able to book them and get what amounted to a regional exclusive. The highbrows and the people who considered themselves intellectuals went bananas. From miles around they came. Every single parking place out front, around the green ? VWs in the old days, the beetles and the vans. Then the Volvos took over—Volvos wall-to-wall; grey and maroon station wagons. What wasn't Volvos was Saabs, Subarus and Jeeps.

"The thing of it was that you couldn't depend on them. Never knew when one of those cult films was going to be born, christened, anointed, whatever it was, as something that had to be seen. Usually some foreign film no one'd paid much attention to, and then all of a sudden someone'd give it a rave in the *Village Voice* or some other paper, magazine, all the finer types had to read, and this particular obscure movie among all the dozens of cheap little movies that get made'd turn out to be a sleeper the elite now had to see. *The Long Good Friday* was one. Handmade Films, I think. British gangster movie. Bob Hoskins was in it. He was the head gangster. Couldn't understand a bloody word he said. The people with long earlobes loved it. *Blue Velvet:* another one—dirty movie full of violence for high-minded folks. All the intellectuals went nuts. Simply had to see it. It was like if you missed that film, whatever one it was that month that had everybody up at UMass or Smith talking—a Gerard Depardieu vehicle, maybe; that might do it. *All the Mornings in the World*; or a Louis Malle—*Atlantic City*; anything he did was always very big.

"I don't know what the hell happened, what they did to you if you were a highbrow and you allowed yourself to miss one. I'm sure it was something terrible, though. They canceled your subscription to the *Times Literary Supplement* or something—*New York Review of Books*. So you had to stay alert, be vigilant at all times. You never knew when one of them was going to come along. And therefore I couldn't tell either.

"The anniversary revivals that I ran were different. You never knew exactly who'd show up, but you knew enough of them would so you'd have a decent house. You could count on it. Alice Cole: a good example. Took it easy on my taxes 'cause the town should have a theater? Four times I saw her in it, total. Half of them were for *The King and I*—Friday and Saturday night, both."

He did say he knew it had been hard for her. She'd already been slowed down a lot by the lung cancer that would kill her two years later, at the age of 74. "Two other times she came. So over the course of ten years she put a grand total of ten bucks where her mouth was. I doubt very much she bought popcorn. A buck a year. Using what amounted to the town's money to keep the Strand open was one thing; spending her own was another. Good thing everyone else in Canterbury didn't

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feel the same way. I couldn't've lasted a year if they had, much less the last twenty-three."

At Cook's funeral he'd nonetheless mourned her honestly. He calculated her initial tax assessment, the basis of all later revaluations, by then had been worth about three thousand dollars to him, 2,300 average admissions—more than a dozen "near-sellout weekends," as he called any when ninety or more customers showed up for the 7:00 show both Friday and Saturday nights ("Eighty more for the nine-o'clock made it a smash hit. This part of the world goes to bed at a reasonable hour"). In the '70s he'd considered himself fortunate when he logged a dozen in a year, and therefore he was thankful to Alice's ghost.

When she died he was 37, still not exactly sure in his own mind what had happened to him between the fall of '68, when he'd gone down to Storrs for his first year of law school, and the summer of '71, after he'd graduated. He'd started out envisioning a quiet but satisfying and at least comfortable career in private practice in the Springfield area—although he said he would've been entirely willing to relocate to a town in the Berkshires, "if someone'd come along and offered me the right kind of opportunity, working conditions, out in that part of the world. I grew up around here, sure, but I was still flexible.

"The only thing that I was really sure of, going into it, was that what I didn't want, no part of it at all, was a big-city firm. Boston, New York, anything like that—even Hartford or Albany. I'd ruled out all of that stuff. Washington. Even though I realized—and Professor Burke warned me about it, too, made it very plain to me; I have to give him that—that my chances of finding the ideal situation, the kind that I'd have the most chance of being comfortable in, if I wanted to be in a firm, would most likely be a whole lot better in one of the larger cities than they were ever going to be in the smaller ones, like Springfield. And they were going to be even worse in the small towns.

"The anonymity, you know? In New York people don't leave you alone because they respect your privacy—they ignore you and what you're doing because they want you to leave *them* alone. They don't know you and they don't want to. In your smaller city—and the towns're even worse—if they *don't* know you; they *want* to know you. They're determined to know what you're up to. They've always got an eye on you, watching what you're doing. So it's bound to be much easier to keep your privacy in a metropolitan environment. And much likelier, too, that I'd be meeting other people in the city that I might like to get to know. But there wasn't any point in talking about that; I didn't want to do it and that was the end of it. So I knew I might have some problems, but I was resigned to it."

First he'd known he'd have to get the bar exam out of the way, of course, and then assuming that he'd found a job—"the idea that I might not never really entered my mind"—he'd need some time to get settled in. "What I projected when I started law school was that all in all it'd probably take me about five years. By then I'd be having a nice life. Whether I'd be on my own or in a small or larger firm I didn't know, hadn't quite decided. But that could wait—no need to. I had plenty of time. One thing at a time."

He emerged three years later having carried a steady B- average all three years, a C or C+ here and there, a B+ or a few Bs to balance the Cs off. "'The record of a conscientious tortoise,'" he recalls his late mentor, Alan Burke, pronouncing it. Burke in addition to teaching contracts and commercial law was the assistant dean in charge of the placement office. "'Slow but steady wins the race.' It wasn't going to get me a federal-court clerkship, nothing so dramatic, but Alan said a lot of private firms might go for what they thought they saw in it. 'The conveyancers, especially: very partial to that kind of track record. Makes them think all they have to do is hire you, show you where the registry of probate is and what they want you to do in it, find you a place to sit in the office, and bingo-bango, their own long days of drudgery're over.'"

But Goff hadn't been able to locate any of those weary real estate specialists. He sent out copies of his resumé and increasingly-plaintive cover letters not only to the real estate "firms that might be hiring" that Dean Burke provided but to virtually every law office between Worcester and the New York line, regardless of which specialty they stated, if any, in the Martindale-Hubbell lawyers' directory. "Most of them never bothered to answer. I suppose they were simply inundated with letters like mine. So after a while they just gave up.

"I had a total of four interviews. One in Springfield, two in Holyoke, one all the way up in Greenfield. I thought that one went the best. The one in Springfield didn't go well at all. And one of the ones in Holyoke, the guy who interviewed me'd been real nice on the phone, real enthusiastic. I was looking forward to it. Solo practitioner, still fairly young, thirty-two or three. Said his practice'd just taken off, *exploded*, and he was bringing somebody else in about five years sooner'n he'd expected. But he got one look at me and I could tell it was over, right off. He became almost hostile. Said I must've misunderstood something he said. He hadn't really intended to hire anyone; he'd just been 'exploring alternatives.' I was out of there in five minutes.

"The one in Greenfield: that would've been a good situation, almost made to order for me. These two maiden ladies, about sixty; they'd known each other in law school. The practice'd belonged to one of their

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fathers—he'd since died. Always expected his own daughter'd come in with him, but then when she graduated, well, he'd taken her friend on, too. I would've gone up there in a second if they'd made me an offer. Heck, by then I was desperate. Would've relocated anywhere, someone'd made me an offer. But a few days after I was up there, one of them called me and said they'd changed their minds. Wouldn't be hiring anyone new after all. 'Too complicated.' That was what she said."

He said at first he thought the explanation was simply that he'd made a mistake by deciding to defer the job hunt at least until after final exams in May, so as not to jeopardize his class-ranking. And then until after the bar exam in June, taking no chances with that. "But instead of improving my chances, which was what I intended, my rule of One Thing at a Time may have been what did me in.

"And I have to say I also may have it at the back of my mind that if by some bad luck or something I *wasn't* able to find a good job on my own, well, that Alan'd gallop to my rescue. Reach down into this mysterious bag of tricks he always acted like he had—as though he had his hands on all these strings that he could pull; he *loved* to do that—and come up with something simply perfect for me. Not that Alan ever actually said anything, gave me any real reason to think that— I could've been fooling myself.

"Because the chances are there were some firms on that list of Alan's, when he drew it up in March and checked off the ones that he thought I should apply to, that were looking then to add people—maybe even someone like me. There had to've been. Maybe not that many, no, that'd end up actually hiring someone, but still, one was all I would've needed, if it was the right one. But it was July by the time I finally got around to putting my name in. By then those that really needed someone probably'd hired him. So I was left out in the cold.

"They start telling you in first year that if you expect to have a job when you graduate, when it's still three years down the line, the time to get started on it's March of second year. 'Get a summer internship where you think you might like to work, where you hope they'll want to hire you when you graduate. Let them get a look at you, while you take a look at them. That way when you do get out, if everything works right, you'll then have a place to go.'

"That was the first piece of advice I deliberately ignored. You know how it is when you're twenty-one or two; you know so much you can do anything. I could do that in those days, and often did: ignore what smarter people told me about important matters, especially if they obviously knew a lot more about them than I did. But the smaller ones back then that would've interested me: they didn't pay the summer help much. I could make a lot more going back to my old summer job tending bar at the Beach House in Provincetown. I'd gotten to know the owners and the regulars liked me. The tips were very good. I made a lot of friends. It was a lot of fun to be on the Cape in the summer with all the other young sports, goofing off. Much more than it was ever likely to be in some old law office in Springfield, cooped up with a bunch of stuffy old bores and middleaged drones, researching the case-law on pre-termitted heirs and sweating through your shirt.

"Did I know I was taking a calculated risk? Of course I did. What I didn't know was that I'd *miscalculated* the risk, badly underestimated it.

"At the beginning of your third year they tell you that if your second-summer tryout job wasn't quite as blissful as you'd hoped, then you'd better get cracking on the job hunt—'forthwith; all deliberate speed.' I didn't take that advice either. I'd really had to study hard to get where I already was in class-rank, the top of the middle third. I didn't even want to *think* about how hard it'd be to get a job if I started to drop down. I thought if I knew what was good for me I'd better disregard that, too. That was my second enormous mistake. It was deliberate, too.

"I had plenty of time to regret those misjudgments, you may be sure, while I spent the summer after third year waiting for the bar results. What I was doing didn't exactly occupy my mind. When I wasn't writing letters begging people to interview me—'please, sir or madam, even just a crust of bread ?'—in the hope that at least they might take pity on me and give me some piecework, then I was doing that dreary work. Most of it was searching titles. Twenty-five bucks a deed—so that the wretch who was paying me to do the work could bill the bank's customer he was theoretically representing oh, about three hundred bucks. It was depressing and humiliating, the worst situation I'd ever gotten myself into in my whole life up 'til then. The only thing that made it bearable was the knowledge it was finite. It wasn't going to last. And I'd learned my lesson. After I'd been admitted to the bar and got a real job, I'd listen to what people said.

"Of course I never dreamed how much worse things could get, and were about to. The bar results were later than usual that year. Everyone was pissed off at the examiners for taking so long and prolonging the agony like that. But in the first part of October it was over. Then we all found out. Didn't we, though—yes indeed. I, especially, and a few more like me: all the other people who had something wrong with them. All of us rejects not only found out then; we'd been found out ourselves as well. Everybody knew. So that was my *third* major mistake. Not passing the bar. Definite oversight on my part.

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"When I opened that letter and found out I'd flunked, I was absolutely stunned. No one's ever knocked me down, even as a kid, but I know what it's like. I sat down like someone'd knocked me off my feet. A giant hand came out of nowhere and silently slammed me down. Fortunately I was standing in front of a chair. Otherwise I might've broken my spine. There wasn't any saliva in my mouth. I couldn't inhale. I was gasping; could not take a breath. There wasn't any air. Tears *sprang* out of my eyes, like they do if you yank a hair out of your nose, but more of them. Ran right down my cheeks, *and I didn't know what they were*, what it was that was making my face wet. I felt like I might be going to throw up. I think I probably sobbed.

"I don't know that for sure. I was alone. No witnesses to back me up. I had no one to hear me or help me when I got that dreadful news. There hadn't been anyone, either. I was pretty much entirely on my own that year, entirely by myself. I didn't even have, at that point in my life, anyone that I could really call, or that I would've wanted to, at least, rely on to comfort me. Another thing that I'd put off, until I was a real lawyer, with his own real job. So I had no one I could tell this awful news. Certainly no one in my family.

"My father: of course he was out. By then I wouldn't've called him with *any* kind of news, even if it'd been good. He would've found some way to ridicule me for whatever might've happened. If I'd said I'd just been appointed to the Supreme Court he would've sneered at me for having to take a government job. But this ? Tell him that I'd flunked the bar? Not in a million years. And if I'd told anyone else in my family, my mother, either one of my two sisters, they would've let it slip out. One of them would've told him. It would've happened. And then some day or night when I least expected it, he'd call me up and I'd answer the phone, and then he'd just leave me for dead. Like something in the road that didn't make it all the way across before the Greyhound came. No, this thing that'd happened to me: it was something I'd just have to get through the best that I could. I had to bear it alone.

"That was very hard to do. What made it so hard was that I couldn't for the life of me imagine how it'd happened. I literally couldn't comprehend it. Then or later, either. I sat there in my crummy apartment where the only way I'd gotten through the worst summer in my life'd been by making it my mantra that it was all going to end, as soon as autumn came. Now it was fall, October at last, and against all odds I'd survived. The ordeal was finally over. Now I could get started. Except of course I couldn't. Not me: I'd flunked the bar.

"It was *impossible*. I'd taken that goddamned full-time, total-immersion, six-hours-a-day lecture course that you then have to study all night to be ready for the next day—and I'd done it. Taken the merciless pounding the review leaders handed out, driven myself every night harder'n they did in the daytime. Weekends too, you may be sure. The only respite I allowed myself was a few beers on Saturday night. I had one friend from law school who liked me, that I got along with. Older guy, from down near Boston. His wife even liked me. She was from New York. My moot court partner, second year. I'd go over to his place and we would have a six-pack. Each of us would have a six-pack. I don't think Lucy liked it much, but we did that, Gary and I, and she put up with it. For six weeks straight, every Saturday, that was all the fun I'd had.

"Then when it was finally time to take the test, I'd done everything right, just like they said. I'd been such a good little boy. Gotten plenty of rest the nights that led up to it: check. Slept like a log after the first day: check. Up with the larks and fresh as a daisy for the second day: check and double-check. I felt fine. I didn't have allergies. No tummy-ache. No distractions in my personal life—didn't *have* any personal life, like I said; another thing I'd put off.

"Test hadn't bothered me, seemed like it was that hard. I hadn't found the questions *easy*, no; some of them were kind of tricky. But I felt good about them all, how I answered them. In those days the whole exam was essay. This was before the multi-state came in, the exam they all use now. You wrote out your answers in bluebooks. I'd been pleased with the way mine came out. Only one or two of the questions made me hesitate at all, and I was even comfortable with the way I'd finally answered those.

"So I was stumped. I couldn't've done anything more than I'd actually done to prepare for it. I'd made a mistake but I didn't know what it'd been. I couldn't explain it.

"That was why even though I signed up, paid for and sat through another hideous review course, the second one, I passed up the first chance to re-take the exam. It would've been sometime that winter. December; January. Whenever it was, I wasn't ready. I still hadn't figured out what'd gone wrong the first time. That made me scared. My thinking was that I wasn't going to subject myself to the risk of failing it again until I knew once and for all what'd caused me to fail it the first time. And was sure I'd corrected it. Too much was riding on it. My sanity. I still didn't know the next summer, either, the summer of seventy-two, or in time for the winter bar that year. So I didn't re-take the exam those times either. In fact, I never did.

"Ten or fifteen years ago, maybe even more recently than that, if you'd asked me why I never went back and re-took the bar exam, that's what I would've told you.

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That I still didn't know why I'd flunked it the first time, and until I did I wasn't going to take a chance of failing it again. Well, I'm older now and I think I've changed my mind. I think now I do know why I flunked. I may've always known. I think I also know why I deliberately ignored the good advice I got in law school about summer jobs, and job-hunting in third year. I may've known those things all along, too, even though I didn't think so.

"Freud may've had the answer. He said, you know, that there's really no such thing as a mistake. That when something goes wrong, breaks, disappears, gets misplaced—ends, if it's a relationship; well, whatever it is, if you look at it close enough what you'll always find is that the person who lost it or broke it or did something that ruined it, destroyed it, if it was a friendship or a love affair or something else, maybe even a job; it's always because the person that the bad thing happened to either wanted it to happen, or figured it was bound to, and did something to bring it on and get it over with. He made sure. And I now think that's what happened to me. I think I didn't get a job and flunked the bar for the same reason that I bought the Strand twenty-three years ago: because I wanted to.

"Some friends of mine've said I ought to keep the place open two more years. Complete a quarter century I made its revival last, when so many people told me that it wouldn't be a year. I could do that if I wanted to. After all, I'm only fifty-two, and I've been fortunate: my health's still good. But now is when the Finch Brothers people want to buy my building, not two years from now. They've made me a good offer. It won't make me a rich man, not by today's standards, but I've always been careful with my money, and with what they're paying me, even if I were alone now, I'd be comfortable.

"As it is, I'll be fairly well-off—as well as quite happy. Ernest owns the house in Provincetown, for summers, and with what we can now afford to spend on the pied-à-terre we're buying in Key West, I think we'll be quite content. So when people say to me: 'Oh, don't give it up so soon. How can you let the Strand close down? It's been important to us,' well, I know how they feel. But what I have to tell them is that my reason for doing it's the same one that I've always had, for everything I've done. It's never really changed at all. I'm doing it because I want to. I'm still having my good time." □

KATHARINE GREGG

Meniscus

And I thought it's that edge between
what you see and what you can't
that pulls like a wave, sucking back into the blue
impenetrable body of the ocean, and there's a
tingle in it like the anticipation of sex
when the body plumps itself yet holds back—or are you
one who swallows your wine in gulps
without allowing the fumes to rise
through the vault of your mouth to your nose?
If that seems too abstruse to you,
let me put it another way. There's a meniscus
on the sea seems to sustain the lobster boats
each morning when the light's still without color.
I love those boats' stubbiness, the way
they growl and push along the dark surface,
seem to hover like bees at each buoy
while the lobsterman hooks his line
to a revolving wheel, hoists up the gushing trap,
lifts out the icy bodies—ancient form joined
to ancient knowledge of the sea—sea that
would kill you in minutes if you fell through it—
black and ice-cold as space but readable
to those who have it in their blood.
I am one who sits in the middle
of the boat, bitten by the chill through its aluminum
skin, yet desiring the solid roll of water
that is green as a necklace of Venetian glass
beads my mother gave me when I was a child
that broke before I knew the sea
could break and tear whitely. Is there
no story of the sea like the story of Icarus,
seduced from a safe footing on land into the sky?
And drowned for his rapture?
A beautiful maiden, youngest daughter, say,
of the king of an island where red hibiscus
shade like parasols and honeyed-sweet fruit hangs
at mouth level. Daily she walks weeping
on the cochina sand, so enamored is she
of the sea that wraps her like a girdle
of clear aquamarine, fine blue and
deepest purple. She begs the sea god
to give it to her, and, being a god,
he does. It's not a happy ending.
O margin of sea, o aromatic sip
of wine, first touch of your lover's skin
against your own. The surface bows
with desire yet holds like the swelling
lip of water at the cup's rim
then bursts in the act of arrival.

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HONEYMOON

A Story by Lucia Nevai

We weren't either one of us Irish, we were Italian, but we wished to be married and especially to honeymoon in the west of Ireland. Tony played the button accordion. Our New York musician friends told us all Tony had to do to sit in with the locals was to show up in a pub with his box. If a session wasn't already brewing, word would magically go out as it does especially well in Ireland where even the wind has a human voice and soon a fiddle, a whistle, pipes—some instrument with a person attached would wend its way to the peat fire and we'd all be speaking music, music, the language that makes strangers into friends.

Our parents were dead set against it. No one wanted to travel to a foreign country for the wedding of their own child. My parents demanded a big Italian wedding at Saint Theresa's on Staten Island where I was raised and they still lived. Tony's parents lived in Queens. They didn't care where in the five boroughs the wedding was as long as my parents paid for it.

A word about Tony: Tony is dark and physically beautiful, a gangly jester type, a man who drifts into a room as if on the wind, who gives the sincere impression that he's fully captivated by you and he is. But he belongs to music and if music calls him, he will go, and you won't even see him leave. This behavior, this density is not very Italian.

When Tony asked to marry me, he told me I could plan any wedding I wanted, from the grandest, most formal affair to a simple private ceremony. He said this the night we walked across the Brooklyn Bridge and stopped in the middle to kiss. The moon was full. He proposed, then played a waltz he wrote for me on the accordion, "Waltz for Diana." I stood there in the moonlight, watching his head fall forward over the accordian, eyes closed, as he played. Below us, the water rolled sullenly as if the whole East River was covered with a plastic swimming pool cover. Behind us the traffic hummed with a low seamless purring bite as tires strummed the steel grid surface of the bridge. I knew something unacceptable awaited me in Tony's love. Still I said yes. I said yes, yes, yes.

Mother and I began to make arrangements. We decided on a high mass, a lavish reception for 200 guests in the Hall, a band that could play everything from an old country tarantella to "Stayin' Alive." Everyone wanted deposits. Each time my father wrote out a check for the caterer, the hall, the band, I was flooded with an awful foreboding. I saw myself in a long white gown, waltzing with my panting father in his huge tuxedo, sweat pouring down his forehead, in front of 200 mostly good people I'd known all my life, plumbers, electricians, telephone technicians, sanitation workers, waste removal experts and their civil servant wives while the band played "Daddy's Little Girl"—and all the while we waltzed something somewhere was going terribly wrong.

A word about me: I am pensive. I never felt particularly Italian either. Although my hair is good strong black Italian hair, it is straight and long and falls to my waist. Strangers sometimes take me for an American Indian. When I am sitting down and they can't see that I'm as tall and gangly as Tony, they sometimes take me for Japanese. Between American Indian and Japanese, I feel more Japanese. I have a stoic streak a mile wide, I'm ceremonial and sensuous and I don't like noise.

One day after many fights with mother, I found the dress we both wanted. I was standing before the three-way mirror in Saks's Bridal Shop, looking sleek, regal and Old World in very fine floor-length French lace. My 300-pound mother was seated on a folding chair to my right, her face flushed with a radiance I have never seen before or since. Looking at my reflection, I saw marinara sauce boiling over the huge stainless steel pots in the kitchen of the Reception Hall, rolling down the white stove and flowing out onto the dance floor. I saw Daddy and me waltzing

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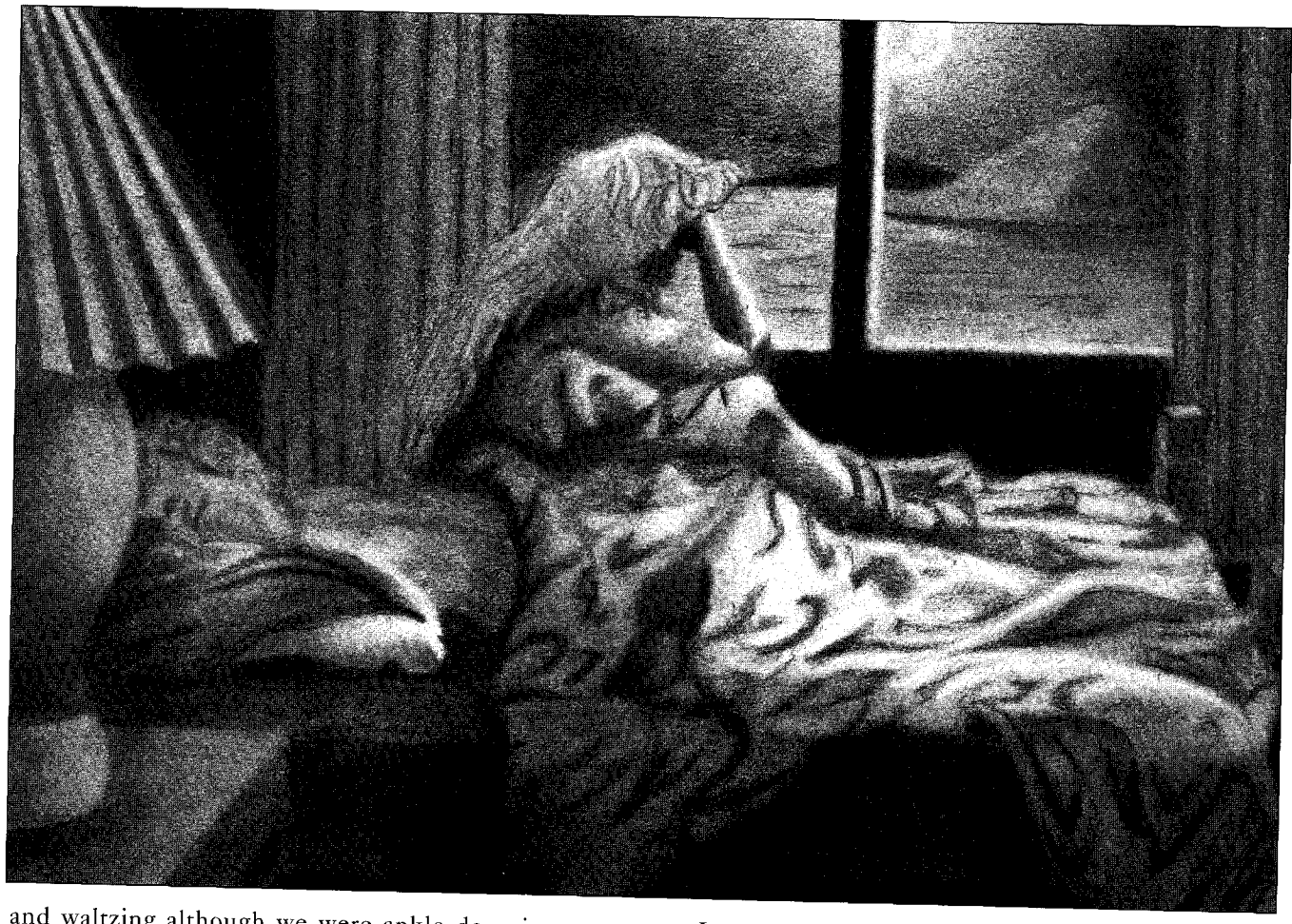

MANUEL MACIAS

and waltzing although we were ankle deep in sauce while Tony floated out the window. We put a deposit on the dress. I took mother out to lunch, then I secretly called The Bridal Shop and all the suppliers and cancelled everything.

We got married in City Hall in downtown Manhattan on Friday afternoon, the sixth of May, Tony in his engineer boots and favorite sweater, two round trip tickets to Ireland sticking out of the pocket of his best blue jeans, his accordion on his right arm and me on his left. We had dinner in Little Italy and took the night flight to Shannon, calling our parents just before boarding with our shocking little announcement. Side by side in coach, we kept kissing. Even in light sleep, our lips, almost as if acting on their own, would find their way to each other.

No clues on Imelda and Liam read the headline in the Irish Press on the newsstand in the Shannon airport. A mother and her three-year old son had been missing from their cottage in County Galway for a week. Their pictures were on the front page, Imelda a classic beauty like the Yeats poem, *hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind and took a mess of shadows for its meat*, Liam, a solemn, curly-headed cherub with cheekbones so high his eyes looked shut even when they were open.

I read the story out loud to Tony as we drove northwest out of Shannon, dazed and disoriented by our lack of sleep, the protocol of driving on the left and the sudden scenery of County Clare, soft brilliant green hills and sharp white cottages, a cluster of sheep, a lone cow. This tale threw me into an unnatural despair. Imelda was a painter. Her estranged husband, based in Dublin, had been very much looking forward to spending this very weekend with Liam.

Soon, we desperately needed a nap. We found a pretty B&B in Kilkee by the sea. I asked the landlady for the more private of the two pinchy rooms because it was our honeymoon. Our usual way of making love for the past two years began with me undressing Tony button by button while he stroked and fondled me every which way. I started. To my surprise and disappointment, Tony didn't do his part. In fact, as I worked my way down his buttons, he looked distressed. When I got to his zipper and found no obvious proof of Tony's being ready, I stopped. He pretended to fall asleep. I pretended to fall asleep too. Then we both really did fall asleep. When I woke up, Tony was cradling me sweetly under one arm. His eyes were open, his gaze directed bravely at the ceiling as if he were contemplating our future.

That night at the Long Dock, Tony and I went

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wild—we ordered all three specials, fresh local Carrigaholt oysters, crab claws in garlic butter and bacon-baked Hake. Tony's box was resting on the chair beside him. We were drinking our share of Guinness, eating with gusto, when a swaggering fellow with a long pony tail sat down next to us and tuned his guitar.

"Give us a song then, Christy," called a man at the bar. "Help him out there, Margo." A depressed-looking, masculine gal appeared from the kitchen and whipped out a tin whistle. They began to play "The Concert Reel." Tony strapped on his box and jumped in on the 17th bar. They segued into "Andy McGann's" which Tony also knew. They tried to leave Tony in the dust on "The Red-Haired Lass" but he knew that too and he raised the ante with "The Old Pigeon on the Gate." They played for an hour—I was soaring—then we sang '60s folk tunes Christy had picked up during an extended gig in a coffee house in Boston. Three times the gent at the bar ordered Hennessys all around. We toddled back to the B&B arm in arm, divinely drunk and light as air.

When I undressed I put on a lace-trimmed, see-through, cream-colored negligee from Sak's, the only bridal thing I hadn't returned. Certainly this would get Tony going. I looped my hair over one eye and danced a little cha-cha toward him as he lay in bed watching me. The negligee must have been too incongruous for Tony. He was used to seeing me in a flannel nightshirt, New York Yankees pinstripes, number 23 for Don Mattingly. He kissed me twice, nuzzled me a little and closed his eyes to go to sleep.

A priest was also missing, we read in the morning paper, and had been for five days—they'd found his burnt-out car on a lonely pier. They'd found Imelda's burnt-out car as well, three miles away from the priest's car on a desolate lane. The priest's little cottage had not been vandalized. The back door was wide open, the table set for tea.

Tony and I were reading the story together over breakfast when our landlady interrupted, announcing to all guests that Tony and I had spent our honeymoon night in Room No. 3. People applauded. We hurried through breakfast. As we left the room, the landlady's shifty-eyed husband clapped Tony on the arm, saying, "Well done, I'm sure, lad."

We drove north in a morose silence up the winding coast road along the high cliffs. Below us, the Atlantic Ocean was in wild torment. It seemed as if an unending succession of massive breakers were rolling in hard straight from New York, smashing suicidally against the cliffs and bursting into bits.

Tony and I had planned to hike on the limestone rock of the Barrens up behind the musically famous village of Doolin. We'd left Kilkee in time and we had the weather for it—brilliant sunshine, crisp blue skies—but we went straight to O'Connor's to drink instead. Tony impressed the bartender by identifying every country represented in the international collection of police badges on display behind the bar. I knew he'd get Canada, France and Germany, but South Africa? Turkey? "Watch him, now," the bartender would say, bringing the other patrons in on the performance. And Tony would guess right again.

"Brazil. Ethiopia. Luxembourg." There was magic in Ireland—here was proof.

A young fiddle player with a head of red curls sat down by the fire and played a slow air that had to be seven hundred years old. Our New York friends said not to expect Michio Russell to sit in at O'Connors -- he was too old, too frail -- but there he was in the flesh, tin whistle and all, green eyes twinkling like an ancient elf. Tony's box was in the car. I urged him to go get it, but he didn't want to miss even a single note.

Michio played Tony's favorite, "The Concertina Reel," then when he sequed into "Drowsy Maggie," Tony and I spontaneously jumped up and did a little jig, which shocked us because we didn't know we knew any jigs. Everyone clapped. Someone somewhere kept buying us rounds.

At four in the morning, we drunkenly stumbled from B&B to B&B, looking for a room. All were full. We ended up at the youth hostel, sleeping on terrible mattresses on different floors, men's and women's.

Imelda: first clues, read the headline in the morning paper. *Gardai may be close to a breakthrough*. The prime suspect was 20-year old Brendan O'Donnell, who was said to have a history of violence, and to be living "rough" on the Galway-Clare border. The paper said he had a deep bond with his mother which was broken when she died suddenly—he was nine years old. Sometimes he was found sleeping on his mother's grave at Clonrush Cemetery near the banks of the River Shannon.

We were both cranky and hungover and that is probably why we set off for County Kerry without getting gas. The tank ran dry on a remote two-lane road in farm country. Tony and I walked five miles into town. The lad at the gas station sold us five litres of gas and threw in a plastic jug container for free. He said if we could wait until noon, he'd drive us back to the car himself, but until then, he alone was manning the pumps and cash register. We thanked him and began the five-mile walk back to the car. "This is ridiculous," Tony said when we'd walked a mile, taking turns lugging the jug. "There's no reason for both of us to walk. You wait here and I'll come back for you."

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This is how I came to be sitting on a white-washed stone mile marker praying to God that Tony would make love to me that night when a beautiful man in an amazing sweater rode up on a red horse and called me by name. "Diana," he said, reigning in the horse hard. His eyes were like blue fire.

"Yes?"

"I've come for you. It's Tony."

"What about Tony—is he all right?" I asked. I couldn't take my eyes off that sweater. Two massive gorgeous cables worked their way up the front, complex and secretive as a row of mystical Celtic knots. The wool was rough and chocolate-colored, flecked with black.

"Tony's fine," the stranger said. "But he'll have me head if I don't fetch you." He sidled his horse over next to me and extended a hand. "Hop up behind me."

I wasn't about to say *I don't know how.* I gave him my hand and hoped he'd explain the rest. "Left foot on the stone," he ordered. I placed the sole of my boot on the mile marker. "Then a big one-two and swing your right leg over."

On the third try I was up behind him. "Take ahold of me middle," he said. I folded my forearms about his body. It was an excellent fit, the back of his body and the front of mine. There was no space between us at all. He nudged the horse in the flanks. She cantered briefly, forcing me to tighten my hold, then she galloped. I laid my cheek against his back and held on for dear life. It was shockingly erotic, every private area of my body lunging rhythmically into his beautiful, mysterious back. What a pity it was only four miles back to Tony.

Tony, it turned out, had fainted. He'd lugged the jug all the way back to the car, emptied it into the tank and promptly passed out. "From the exertion," Seamus said, for that was the stranger's name. "The exertion together with the fumes." We sat around the kitchen of his farmhouse—Seamus was a farmer—drinking tea and eating home-made Irish soda bread with fresh butter and strawberry jam.

Seamus insisted we stay the night. We parked our bags in a big funky loft open to the living room. One glance at the space—candles, stereo, king-size waterbed—told me it was Seamus's personal love nest. I pictured him riding the red horse to pick up his date. She'd hop up behind him. They'd gallop hard right into the living room and fly up to the waterbed. I couldn't wait to get Tony to myself up there.

At dusk, Seamus took us for a walk to meet his forty cows. Each one had a lady's name. We walked around stroking these lovely large black and white ladies as Seamus explained organic farming, Irish-style. It worked like this: if Seamus fed his cattle no treated supplements, no commercially manufactured food, but allowed them to graze outdoors twelve months a year—which for forty head required three hundred acres—then Seamus was entitled to a government subsidy for raising cattle organically. Plus, he made money selling the herd. He figured the calving season so he wouldn't be tied down, bringing in a bull on St. Patrick's Day and hauling him away three weeks later. All the cows calved within an eight week period. Out to the field they went to graze and Seamus took off for Ibiza or Provence. This year, he was thinking about Argentina.

We were all hungry, so we walked across Seamus's field to a local fish and chips place Tony and I could never have found on our own. Seamus introduced us all around, got us totally stewed and persuaded Tony to play for his mates which Tony did. He played "Toss the Feathers" and "Music in the Glen." When they demanded one more, he fixed his eyes on mine and segued into "Drowsy Maggie." He'd never played this song before, yet now he seemed to be reading the notes in my eyes. We tried to pay for our drinks but no one would take our money.

Tony promised Seamus and his mates a bona fide Italian feast should they ever come to New York. He listed his specialties. They listened hard and with that inborn respect for the sound of syllables unique to Celts, they repeated perfectly the names of the delights Tony promised, "Pepperoni Imbottiti alla Napoletana, Vermicelli con le Vongole in Bianco, Spaghetti alla Puttanesca." How they loved it when Tony told them that last fancy-sounding dish, a basic red sauce with olives, was, literally translated, Spaghetti The Way Whores Cook It.

The three of us stumbled arm in arm back across the field to Seamus's house at four in the morning, tripping over thorny bushes, stumbling into dirt clods, falling down in fits of hysterical laughter as Tony played "Mary Had A Little Lamb" in the lowest possible registers of the accordion. I climbed right up that loft ladder, stripped myself naked and lay spread-eagled on the sheets of that gently rolling water bed, waiting for Tony. Downstairs, I heard Seamus offer Tony a nightcap. I couldn't believe my ears—Tony accepted. We had yet to make love in Ireland—what kind of honeymoon was this? I had to lie there and listen to Seamus talk until dawn about the Sheep Dog trials! Anyway, it worked like this: the Sheep Dog Trials tested the skills of a certain strain of collie bred to herd. In the trials, a dog responds to its owner's whistles, completing in order a series of complex commands, for example: move these eight cows through that gate, bring Bessie here and Lucy there to the barn, send the five remaining to the western field.

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They found the priest. His picture was all over the morning paper. The body was discovered in a shallow grave in a wooded area, shot once in the back of the head. Gardai speculated that the suspect allowed the priest first to kneel and fold his hands in prayer before he pulled the trigger. I gave up all hope. Tomorrow's headlines I already knew: two more bodies, Imelda and Liam, shot once in the back of the head, lying together in a single shallow grave in a wooded area not far from the priest.

We headed for the tip of the Dingle Peninsula. A lovely pinkish light hung in the sky all afternoon, seeming to follow us as we drove that long, hauntingly beautiful coastal drive. Ballyferriter at the westernmost point was a one-street town, a charming rush of quaint two-story buildings with freshly painted storefronts and colorful enamel signage, all in Gaelic. The fresh paint put a defiant, cheery, face on everything, a challenge to the impermanence worked by the heavy salt sea air.

All the pub doors were open. Our car windows were down and we heard music. Tony wanted to grab his box and find the session. He wanted to jam. I refused. I was fed up. Before we did one single thing, I told Tony, we were going to book a room, a quiet, romantic, private room with a big comfortable bed. He said fine. We found one next to the pub where the music was playing. It was a spacious garret outfitted with a brass four-poster, a little round table laid for tea, a private bath and a long white wooden windowseat with a view of the sea—I was ecstatic. The sea was a beautiful, restless green. The Blasket Islands dotted the horizon, enchanting and mystical like stepping stones to heaven. The landlady patiently repeated for me the names of four of the five islands, and I, trying to emulate that Irish genius for sound, repeated crisply after her until she was satisfied.

As soon as she left, I locked the door and went for Tony's buttons. It had been so long. He looked gloomy. When I got into his zipper and found nothing to work with, I stopped. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"You tell me," I said.

"Not here," he said. "Not now."

"Why not now?" I said. "It's our honeymoon."

"Look," he said. He drifted away to the windowseat, his back to me. "I don't know what's wrong."

"When," I said, "will you know?" My breath caught in my throat on *know*—the word was inaudible. I could taste it in the back of my throat, the climax I'd been waiting for, salty, strange and personal like the taste of blood when I bite my tongue. Tony didn't answer. I looked at his long ghostly back. *How much do I love him*, I asked myself and the answer came, *More than everything*. I left the room.

The sun had gone down. I walked without knowing where I was going or what I was doing. I tried to calm myself by counting to ten but I reached 122 and was filled with rage. I climbed down the rocks and stood at the edge of the sea. The water was tossing and pounding violently. I pounded my forehead with my fist.

Out of nowhere, an older man appeared, grabbed me and growled, "Stop it!" Very roughly, he kissed me, scraping my cheek with his harsh, stubbly, three-days growth and leaving a sour vomitty taste on my mouth. Was he accosting me or did he think he knew me? With both hands on his chest I pushed him away. He fell onto the sand seat first. I scrambled up the rocks, running back to town, up the stairs to our room. I was afraid Tony would be gone. I was afraid I would never see him again.

He wasn't in the room, but his things were still in the closet. I took a deep breath. I'd tried to escape all this, whatever it was, when I gave up the dress, the wedding, the mass, the hall, yet here it was, big as life. I decided to play the whole Tony marriage by ear.

He was next door in the pub. When I walked in, they were playing a song that was a favorite of mine, "Down The Broom." Tony ordered me a Guinness and a ham sandwich. Every man who walked into that pub I studied to see if it was the man from the beach—I would have known him instantly—but there were none who fit the description, none who even came close.

An uilleann piper joined the session. The reels and airs took a thick, throaty mournful turn. I thought about sperm, how beautiful and white and mysterious it was when it went pumping out of men, into things and people. I wondered if I would ever see it again. I hoped I would. They started to play "The Concert Reel." Tony had his box right there, but he didn't have the heart to join in after all. We listened til two, then climbed the stairs arm in arm and fell into bed in an affectionate tangle. I was facing out the window, listening to the sea, watching an amazing herd of ghostly black clouds go galloping slowly out of the southern hemisphere across the half moon. Tony played with my hair.

I sensed the very moment he fell asleep. His hands stopped playing and I could feel his eyelashes close on the side of my cheek. I stayed awake awhile longer, watching the clouds move across the sky until all that was left under the moon were the twinkling lights of the Blaskets. I named the islands, the four I knew. There was a fifth island out there, the landlady had assured me, but I wouldn't be able to see it from here until I'd actually been there. □

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DIONISIO D. MARTINEZ

The Prodigal Son Considers a Diplomatic Career

Out of respect for the elders of the village where he finds himself sober for the first time in years, he shows reverence for their gods and doesn't laugh at their icons. They believe him and make him a holy man. Fearing that the villagers might be contagious, and thinking only of himself, he seals their wounds and concocts potions for their pains. They trust him and make him a healer. To show his vulnerability, he bathes in a small pond with the men, eats from their unwashed plates, sleeps with their women. As they parade by his bed, the villagers dry the cold sweat from his forehead and call him a martyr. He tells them that his condition is temporary. When he regains his strength and gets up, they call him a prophet. He predicts that from time to time, in their sleep, the women will hear the voices of the gods. The elders tell him that the women have always heard the voices of the gods. They call him a fraud and make him chief.

The Prodigal Son: Vegas, After Hours

Walking toward a phone booth, he tucks in the wrinkled shirt, because these things matter, and wonders what it would be like to stand in the halo of a nuclear blast. He wants to be a raving lunatic, talk to himself as loudly as those people who walk around talking back to God, but suspects that the line of communication with the self is damaged or busy this morning. Perhaps he's already getting through and doesn't know it. His children once made telephones out of tin cans linked by a string. When the older one got tired of pretending, the younger child ran from one can to the other, saying *I'm gonna catch myself*. Meaning, one assumes, the voice. There's a woman in the phone booth. Because she's not talking, he can't tell if she's listening intently to someone or getting up the courage to dial. Or to hang up. He's fascinated by his own patience, maybe alarmed. He thinks of traffic, his last conversation and engines running on diesel fuel at the other end of the line, how one distinctive sound marks an ordinary place.

The Prodigal Son and the Epistemology of Chance

Further evidence shows that we have reached the point of maximum risk.
—A. Greenspan, Chairman, U. S. Federal Reserve

Just outside of Reno, Nevada, he realizes that he left his wallet on the nightstand. He thinks of the argument at the motel and wonders if the maid he insulted has picked him clean. Looking for a good place to make a U-turn, he reviews a mental inventory of all the amulets in the wallet—a strip of pop wisdom from a fortune cookie *(People who don't know where they're going usually wind up somewhere else)*, the only photograph he owns in which everyone is more than likely still alive, the horoscope that says *You will travel*, and a crude map with a phone number and no name. He's almost certain it's a map to the house of someone who said *Write down my number in case you get lost.* All this time he has entertained the thought of calling to say *I'm always here*, but it would sound too melodramatic even in jest. He passes a break in the median and keeps going. At every good opportunity to turn back, he decides to go on. He drives into Reno in time for breakfast.

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eyed AWRY: THE TNGEN

GREGORY BATESON was six-foot-five with a massive body. His anthropologist wife, Margaret Mead, was conspicuously shorter. In the latter's autobiography, *Blackberry Winter*, there is an astonishing photograph of the mismatched couple side by side in which Bateson looks like a benign rumpled giant, too large to fit within the world, much less a photograph, while his partner looks up in amazement.

At first glance, one is reminded of Diane Arbus's famous photograph of a young giant in his living room, towering over his parents, who stare at him wide-eyed, as if to say "What did we do to deserve this?" It also calls to mind photographs of the Ames distorted room (Fig. 1), a perceptual psychology demonstration in which a dramatically misshapen room appears normal from a fixed viewing point, so that people placed inside appear either Lilliputian or Brobdingnagian, depending on where they stand.

The distorted room demonstration was invented in 1935 by an American lawyer, artist, optical physiologist, and psychologist named Adelbert (Del) Ames II. A Harvard-educated aristocrat, he had the distinction of being engaged, if briefly, to Margaret Mary (Peggy) James, daughter of William James and niece of Henry James. He was also George Plimpton's great-uncle. As founder and director of the Dartmouth Eye Institute in the 1930s, he diagnosed a visual dysfunction called *aniseikonia*, and invented more than two dozen extraordinary laboratory illusions which today are collectively known as "the Ames demonstrations in perception."

Frequently cited in psychology textbooks, the Ames demonstrations were wholeheartedly embraced by transactional psychology, a spin-off of pragmatism that became popular in the 1950s when it challenged established assumptions about experiential objectivity. To transactionalists, the mind is an active participant in the "construction" of human experience, and perception consists of a mixture of goals, conjectures, and expectations, as well as the things that are being perceived.

As it happened, Del Ames actually encountered Gregory Bateson at a scientific gathering in the late 1940s. The meeting occurred in a suite in New York, where Ames had set up his demonstrations to show to conference participants. When Bateson

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UFT Ames

ROY R. BEHRENS

arrived, he was the only visitor. "Ames greeted me," he remembered, "and suggested that I start at the beginning of the sequence of demonstrations while he went back to work for awhile in a small room furnished as an office. Otherwise, the apartment contained no furniture except for two folding chairs."

After viewing more than twenty demonstrations, Bateson grew tired. But when he rested his huge body on a folding chair, it collapsed beneath him. Minutes later, when he washed his hands for lunch, hot water came out of the faucet marked "cold." Then, as he and Ames walked to a restaurant, Bateson recalled, "My faith in my own image formation was so shaken that I could scarcely cross the street. I was not sure that the oncoming cars were really where they seemed to be from moment to moment."

AMES HAD BECOME a perceptual psychologist by a prolonged and unusually indirect route. Born in 1880, he was the son of General Adelbert Ames, a Civil War hero and the Governor of Mississippi during Reconstruction. His maternal grandfather was General and Congressman Benjamin F. Butler, one of the most outspoken and controversial figures in the Civil War, and an unsuccessful presidential candidate.

Del Ames entered Harvard University in 1899, where, despite an apparent inclination toward philosophy and psychology (his favorite teachers were William James and George Santayana), he chose instead a law career, graduating from Harvard Law School in 1906. Admitted to the Massachusetts bar, he joined a prominent Boston law firm and embarked on a life that he later described as "the easy existence of the well-to-do." He became proficient at polo, winning in 1910 the Junior Division Championship of the U.S. Polo Association. But he spent a significant part of his time playing cards and gambling at horse races.

Although the time and circumstances are unclear, a personal crisis occurred in his life, probably around 1910. While gambling in Saratoga Springs, New York, he abruptly resigned from the law firm—an action he later attributed to his naïve belief "that the law dealt with equity and justice"—and arranged to dissolve his engagement to Peggy James (described by a friend of the James family as "a strange

FIGURE 1

Two-page spread from The Mind by John Rowan Wilson from the Life Science Library (New York: Time Inc., 1964). Publication of this book, with astonishing photographs of a boy and a dog in a distorted room, contributed to renewed interest in the Ames demonstrations in the 1960s.

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FIGURE 2

Edmund C. Tarbell, *Portrait of Blanche Ames* (1907). Oil on canvas, 44 1/2 x 34 1/2 inches. Collection of Borderland State Park.

little creature with dark blazing eyes, and with a most vivid inner life"). "Disillusioned in the law and disappointed in love," as Ames's niece later described him, he was determined to find a career "that would take all his energy, all his imagination, all his skill, and yet extend far out of his grasp."

At age 30, unemployed and unmarried, he chose to abandon his privileged life to become a professional artist. "I had made drawings since I was a boy," he recalled later, "and I had a real desire to learn to paint." He converted a police paddy wagon into a makeshift mobile home, in which he traveled in the summer, painting landscapes *en plein air*. In winter, he lived in a single room in a rooming house in Boston.

While the Ames family was progressive in many ways, they were astonished by Del's extraordinary behavior, as were his affluent, conventional friends. When he dropped out of law, only two or three friends remained close to him, and of his family, who "now mildly considered him an outcast," the person who firmly remained by his side was his older sister, Blanche, who was also an artist.

TEN YEARS EARLIER, Blanche Ames had married Oakes Ames, of an unrelated family, who was a Harvard botanist and a leading authority on orchids. In 1899, she had graduated from Smith College, with a bachelor's degree in art history and a diploma in studio art. Beginning in 1902, she illustrated her husband's scientific papers, a role she continued for most of her life. She also painted in oils, an interest that likely was spurred by the fact that in 1906 Oakes hired a prominent Boston artist, Edmund C. Tarbell, to paint a magnificent portrait of Blanche in her wedding dress (Fig. 2).

In 1911, Oakes and Blanche Ames moved to Borderland, an opulent three-story mansion designed entirely by her. Located on a vast wooded estate about 20 miles south of Boston, Borderland State Park was acquired by the State of Massachusetts in 1971, two years after Blanche's death, and is now open to the public.

Shortly after Del's resignation, he sought the advice of his sister, who offered to help him to learn to paint and to share her studio at Borderland. Meanwhile, Del had been approached by the Shawmut Bank of Boston, which asked that he create a bust of the bank's symbol, Obbatinewat, the Native American leader who greeted the colonists in 1621. Completed in 1912, a graphic interpretation of Del's sculpture was eventually adopted as the bank's famous trademark (Fig. 3).

At the same time, Blanche and Del had begun to develop the plan

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FIGURE 3

Corporate symbol of the Shawmut Bank, based on a graphic interpretation of Del Ames's sculpture of Obbatinewat.

for a complex color notation system. More extensive than the Munsell System, it consisted of 3300 color variations (hues, values and intensities), precisely mixed and painted on swatch cards, then numerically coded to match tubes of paint of the same range and number (Fig. 4). While painting, the system was used in the following way: Using photographs and direct observation, a detailed drawing of the subject was prepared, then colors of the scene were matched with cards from the system. The corresponding color codes were noted on the drawing (like a paint-by-number diagram), and when virtually every aspect of the painting had been matched with swatches, the appropriate colors of paint were applied.

Throughout 1912, for a period of about ten months, Del virtually lived at Borderland, while Blanche and he worked side by side as they studied color, light, and perspective, in the hope of producing realistic effects in their paintings. Soon however, they became concerned about the implications of binocular vision, the fact that perception is normally based on the mediation of two different points of view, because our eyes are spaced apart. As a result, a chain of disquieting questions arose: Should artists make a copy of the retinal image of a single eye (as is the intention in linear perspective), or should they simulate the view that results from the fusion of two retinal images? What constitutes "realism" in painting? And, even more fundamental, of what does "realistic" perception consist?

Near the end of the year, Del stopped living and working at Borderland. Instead, he and Blanche rented a studio in Boston, a decision that may have resulted in part from the apparent jealousy of Oakes, as well as the determination that their work could go no further until at least one of them learned more about the science of perception. Conveniently, a leading authority on optical physiology was at Clark University, only 30 miles from Boston, where Del arranged to study from 1913 to 1917. During that period, Blanche and Del's collaboration was suspended, because Del was devoting his time to scientific research while Blanche was a leading participant in the Massachusetts branch of the woman suffrage movement.

Their work was further interrupted by World War I, during which Del was a captain in the U.S. Army Signal Corps. Placed in charge of a machine shop in which prototypes for instruments (including some optical instruments) were designed and tested, he became friends with Charles A. Proctor, a Dartmouth College physics professor. After the war, Del might have returned to Clark University, but the person with whom he was

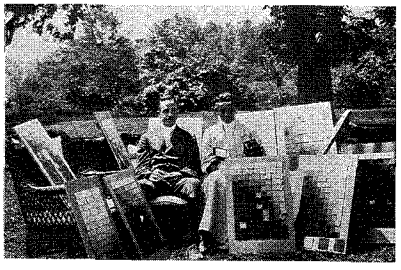

FIGURE 4

Del Ames and his sister, Blanche Ames Ames, surrounded by their color charts, at Blanche's Borderland estate (now Borderland State Park), near North Easton, Massachusetts, c. 1912. Author's collection.

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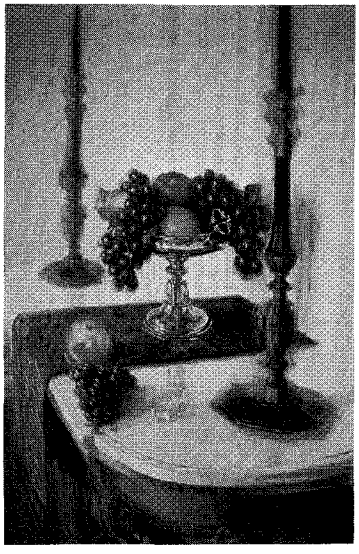

FIGURE 5

Blanche Ames Ames, *Fruit and Candles* (1922). Oil on canvas, 40 x 28 inches. Collection of Borderland State Park.

working had died. Instead, he accepted Proctor's invitation to continue his research at Dartmouth in Hanover, New Hampshire.

BEFORE MOVING TO Dartmouth, Del Ames had never published a scientific paper. But from 1921 to 1923, while sharing a laboratory with Proctor, he published four major research articles. The first was a comparative survey of color notation systems, including the one that he and Blanche had invented. In the second and third articles, he reported his findings regarding the dioptrics of the eye, the structure and function of its refractive lens system.

Of particular significance was the fourth article, entitled "Vision and the Technique of Art," which consists of a detailed account of the link between art and optical physiology which Del and Blanche had investigated, as artists, at Borderland, and Del and Proctor had carried on, as scientists, at Dartmouth. The article reveals that, as early as 1912, Blanche and Del had concluded that a painting should have the same visual attributes as a retinal image, that it "should be similar in its general characteristics to the pictures we receive on our retinas while holding one center of focus." In other words, only those features of the artist's view that fall within the line of sight would be clearly focused. All other areas would appear more or less unfocused, including all peripheral areas, both horizontal and vertical, and those that are nearer and further away. In addition, consistent with the appearance of retinal images, the painting would exhibit *chromatic aberrations*, due to wave length variance caused by the curve of the retinal plane, and *barrel distortion*, also because of the retinal curve.

To witness the results of this method, it is helpful to look at a painting completed by Blanche in 1922 (Fig. 5). Entitled *Fruit and Candles*, it is a diagonal view of a bowl of apples, grapes, and other fruit, positioned on a table top, with an ornate candleholder and candle on each end of the table. Looking at the painting, it becomes evident that the bowl of fruit, in the exact center of the canvas, was the artist's center of focus as well. Portions of the bowl and fruit are precisely focused, while all other parts of the painting are blurred. Color intensity and value contrast are greatest in the foreground and nearest the center of focus, while, to simulate barrel distortion, the candlesticks are slightly bent. When the painting is viewed properly, the viewer's focus is the same as the artist's, which produces an increased illusion of depth.

Unfortunately, a major consequence of the article was the abrupt termination of Del and Blanche's relationship, because only Del and

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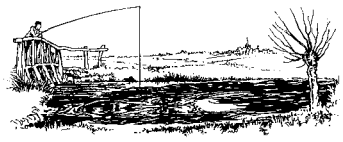
FIGURE 6

Nineteenth-century anamorphic puzzle picture in which a portrait of Beethoven is concealed in the ripples of a pond.



Proctor were listed in initial drafts as co-authors of the paper, with no joint authorship for Blanche. There was an exchange of anguished and angry letters, exacerbated by Oakes on the sideline, and when the paper was finally published, Blanche was listed as a co-author. But Del never painted again, and while he and Blanche remained cordial in later years, their earlier closeness was never restored.

IT APPEARS LIKELY that the Ames demonstrations were arrived at serendipitously, by way of Del's dual involvement in art and optical physiology. While investigating retinal images at Dartmouth, he discovered aniseikonia, a visual dysfunction in which the two retinal images are so different that the brain cannot readily fuse them. Persons who are aniseikonic (of whom Del himself was one) are subject to headaches, imbalance, nervousness, photophobia and other symptoms that are otherwise unaccountable. But the symptom of greatest significance—because it anticipates the demonstrations—is the distortion of angles and distance, so that flat surfaces appear tilted, rectangles look trapezoidal, and trapezoids look rectangular. Del's diagnosis of aniseikonia and his invention of corrective lenses resulted in the founding of the Dartmouth Eye Institute in 1934.

As it happened, the work for which Del was eventually known was less in optical physiology than in perceptual psychology and philosophy. It began in 1935, when he designed what he called jokingly a "cockeyed room," a misshapen room interior in which people appear to shrink or grow as they walk from one corner to another, tilted surfaces appear flat and trapezoids look rectangular. He was 55 when he made the first distorted room. By the time of his death 20 years later, he had produced more than two dozen laboratory illusions, the plans for which were published in William H. Ittelson's *The Ames Demonstrations in Perception: A Guide to Their Construction and Use* (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1952; reprinted 1968). The *distorted room* is the demonstration most often cited in textbooks, but other familiar examples include the *leaf room*, which simulates the effects of aniseikonia; the *architect's room*, in which a narrow rectangular space appears to be a square room interior; the *chair demonstration*, constructed of suspended wire and pieces of wood, which from a single point of view appears to be simply a series of chairs; and the *rotating trapezoid window*, which appears not to rotate but to sway back and forth.

Virtually all the Ames demonstrations are extrapolations of issues that Del and his sister addressed at Borderland while investigating aspects of artistic vision. Most,

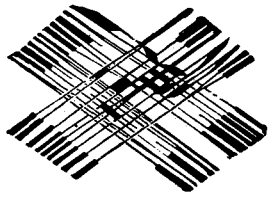


FIGURE 7

Turn-of-the-century anamorphic typography which reads "A Happy" from one oblique angle, "New Year" from the other side.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to the families of both Adelbert Ames II and Blanche Ames Ames; Borderland State Park (particularly Elinor Yahrmarkt); and the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College. This research was made possible in part by funding from the Graduate College at the University of Northern Iowa.

ARTICLE DESIGNED BY SARAH L. STEIL

perhaps all, are derivative of linear perspective, and most are designed to be viewed from a fixed viewing point with one eye only. More specifically, the great majority are examples of *anamorphosis* or "secret perspective," a kind of distortion that artists have used since the 15th century.

In linear perspective, a painting is normally viewed from the front. In anamorphosis, the picture is distorted when seen frontally, even indecipherable, the image becoming intelligible only from an eccentric point of view, such as the edge of the painting. Shakespeare refers to this technique in *Richard II*, when he talks about certain "perspectives which, rightly gazed upon [from the front], / Show nothing but confusion,—eyed awry [from the edge], / Distinguish form." Discovered by Leonardo da Vinci about 1485, anamorphosis was widely known in Europe by the 16th century, its most common use being the disguise of erotic and scatological imagery (for example, *A Man Breaking Wind* and *A Woman Relieving Herself*).

Among the most famous anamorphoses are two works in the National Gallery in London. One is a Hans Holbein painting entitled *The Ambassadors*, a double portrait painted in 1533. Appearing to float diagonally across the bottom portion of that painting is a shape which is unintelligible when viewed frontally, but clearly recognizable as a human skull when viewed from a very odd angle above and to the side of the painting (compare Fig. 6). The second is an ingenious perspective cabinet, called *Peepshow with Views of the Interior of a Dutch House*, completed about 1756 by Samuel Van Hoogstraten, a painter of *trompe l'oeil* (art that "fools the eye") and a pupil of Rembrandt. In this simulation of a room interior, it is apparent that part of the checkerboard floor continues onto the wall—just as it does in Ames's architect's room—and yet, when observed from the peephole, the effect is not at all distorted. One wonders if these two examples were known by Del when he invented his demonstrations. It is curious that, despite his lifelong interest in optics, art and linear perspective, there is no mention of anamorphosis in his published articles.

One purpose of Van Hoogstraten's perspective cabinet, writes Celeste Brusati in *Artifice and Illusion* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), her richly illustrated biography of Van Hoogstraten, is to serve as "a consummate display of [its creator's] ingenuity," while another is to demonstrate "how the eye is deceived by nature and by the painter's art." Similarly, however one rates the significance of the Ames demonstrations, they are undoubtedly evidence of the intelligence and resourcefulness of their

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inventor. They are, as E.H. Gombrich said in *Art and Illusion*, "ingenious examples of *trompe l'oeil* for the laboratory."

There is less certainty about the scientific legacy of the Ames demonstrations. "They were ingenious all right," remembers Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner in *In Search of Mind*, who first saw the demonstrations in the late 1940s (and later married Ames's niece), because, in his opinion—a view that others find unfair—they were trickery more than research. They were not scientific "experiments" but artful "demonstrations," argues Bruner, in the sense that the eye was held captive by artificial constraints. We rarely perceive anything in daily life from a fixed viewing point with one eye only, through "snapshot vision." Instead we are constantly moving about, gathering information with both eyes from multiple points of view. By speciously withholding clues, says Bruner, the demonstrations had insufficient resemblance to normal experience, evoking what Bruner refers to as "weird decisions."

IN RECENT YEARS, artists have continued to experiment with anamorphosis, sometimes with apparent connection to Ames, sometimes not. In 1973-74, for example, a Dutch artist named Jan Beutener (who was unaware of Del Ames's research) created an extraordinary artwork entitled *The Room* (Fig. 8). This large wooden installation consists of a space designed to be viewed through a peephole, like Van Hoogstraten's perspective cabinet or most of the Ames demonstrations. Looking through the peephole, one sees what appears to consist of a room with two windows on the rear wall, an open door on the left, and a continuous wall on the right. In the foreground is a shipping crate, and an unpretentious chair with a jacket hanging from it. In the background is a wooden stepladder.

Having looked through the peephole, the viewer is also encouraged to stroll around the outside of the room, where all its features are visible through other openings. Doing that, one sees that the chair is not really a chair, but sticks that are simply arranged on the floor. The jacket is hanging on hidden supports. The crate is a cockeyed assembly of boards. And the wooden stepladder is not a ladder, but a grotesque assemblage of curious shapes that makes use of every traditional trick in the history of illusionistic painting, from anamorphosis to simulated shadows.

Like the perspective cabinets of his Dutch predecessors, Beutener's installation is a demonstration of his virtuosity. It is also a startling reminder of how easily the constrained eye can be hoodwinked— and it serves as a tribute, intended or not, to the ingenuity of Del Ames.

FIGURE 8a

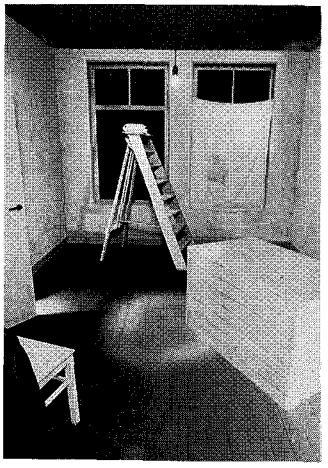

FIGURE 8b

FIGURE 8

Jan Beutener, *The Room* (1973-74). Installation. Subsidized by the Dutch Ministry of Culture. When viewed properly through a designated peephole (8a), Beutener's distorted room artwork appears to be a normal room containing a stepladder. However, when viewed from another position (8b), the extent of its distortion becomes apparent. Photographs courtesy the artist.

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Unclassifieds

(This, That, & the Other)

MICHAEL KOPACZ

Godhead at 12

Only a channel for the god Karmatra, she is not divine, yet from all quarters disciples come, seeking her scent in one part per earth. They arrive on hope complex, testy with baggage train, and waving a syringe of mental virus. She in turn taps, empties, and samples for future use. Quoting a mantra of Karmatra, she tells them at the induction center, Happiness means surrender to the inner voice of Karmatra. In thirty days you will no longer be deaf. She then pares them down to half with crystal-vortice mind props and tucks them away deep in a mountain panopticon before allowing them to stiffen their hair with lime and burn the rune of her name into their palms. Upon release, they form into regimented dog packs. She gives them their own dishes and tags. She tells them the world will soon end. Every few weeks she holds court beneath the stars, on a dais outside her chateau imported from ancient France, facing east, moon cusp in her hair. Dosing her body with mirage, she rises to the occasion like the wise and mighty Emperor Aurelius, flinging her anger away, her face a wind of cliff groaning at the edge of the shelf.

Secretly, unknown to anyone but her masseur, she desires to uproot herself in a roar of spume and stone and slosh her way like a great giantess around the earth's waist, walking softly upon the deep trenches of the sea and careful not to disturb slumbering monstrosities. This certainly would give her the visibility edge she needs, says Brian Kindred, former boyfriend and closest advisor. But that is not enough. By means of television spots, ads, and personal tours of major American cities, she recruits a nation who demand secession, or at least one major island in the Solomons chain. Outside her window at night, they puff and bleat like lonely whales, whimper in her stalls, run mazes and saliva gauntlets till dawn in hopes she will absolve them of memory and juice their eyes into shiny new strobes they can flash in the face of the locals who think they're all crazy. But she doesn't hear them. She only slips on headphones, listens to grrl rock from the Kill Dolls and sips Ting-Ting Coladas. She believes she is the reincarnation of Mataxia, a warrior goddess from the lost continent of Mu. She makes sure that Brian's body is never found. □

MOLLY MOYNAHAN

The Sobriety Thing

The sobriety thing is you stole two jam jars full of whiskey out of this barrel of scotch shaped like a redwood to take on the 10th grade camping trip which was supposed to bring your class together after Bucky Salt was expelled from school for taking Melinda Larsen's sculpture of an Airedale and dropping it off the roof during Mr. Fellows' biology class when we were dissecting fetal pigs and it sounded like the bomb dropped but Mr. Fellows was on whatever it was he inhaled in the biology closet, ether or maybe gas like the stuff I get at the dentists that always makes me want to make a speech about the nature of the universe. So nothing happened except Dougie Murray took our fetal pig and put it into Claudia Bentley's bookbag so when she opened it at lunch she fainted (someone said her eyelids were quivering) but I wasn't there because I was on the girl's hockey field with Larry Feinstein the drug pusher smoking this hash he said his mother bought in Sri Lanka. And the real reason they expelled Bucky Salt was because his parents didn't have any money.

So anyway, I drank one of the jars of scotch and then I told Lisa Sommers that yes, she was fat, and yes, I did almost have total sex with Carter Sykes whom she was practically engaged to since dancing school and I would have finished except I suddenly remembered that Carter was a complete Jock-misogynist-misanthropic-rascist-limp-dicked wasp who liked the Beach Boys. I left her crying under a fir tree and went to the rec cabin where people were dancing to the Bee Gees and I got Warren Dikes, the AV geek, to play *Stairway to Heaven* and I did a striptease and then I told Madeline Burnett

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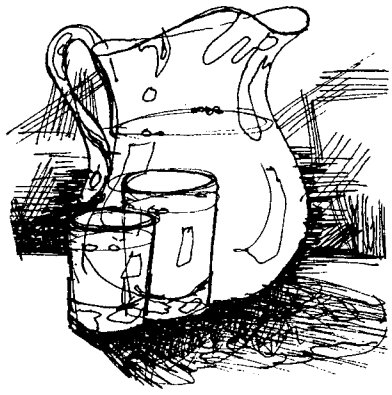
that her father had an affair with the wife of the guy who used to mow our lawn which wasn't exactly confirmed since my sister had heard my mother whisper something that sounded vaguely like that—but who the fuck cared? Madeline was one of the people who said Bucky Salt deserved to be expelled and when she started crying about her father I said I'd also heard something about her mother and the lawn guy and maybe she was really his daughter which wasn't a reflection on him because he used to let me drive his truck.

It was the acid that made things go out of control. Larry Feinstein's purple haze which his mother brought home from some organic LSD farm in northern California. Since it didn't work immediately and Larry swore it was organic, I took two more and since I was already naked, I jumped into the pool at the bottom of the waterfall which was supposedly off-limits and since it was October, I thought I'd entered into the soul of ice. I mean like ice was God and I worshipped it and then I worshipped Larry Feinstein which was definitely drugs because he'd always reminded me of a gerbil or some sort of nocturnal burrowing rodent like maybe something we'd dissect in biology—a cross between a mole and a gopher—but now he had this aura like a black light poster and he was singing a Leonard Cohen song:



Suzanne takes you down to her place by the river—

And this other shit about the garbage and the flowers and I was thinking about Mrs. Feinstein and how she gave Larry all these drugs and how cool that was and my mother never believing me when I lied and said I was going to the library which I never was but when I have a kid and she lies to me I'm going to believe her. And also how old my parents are and that getting old is really weird and maybe they'll invent something which will mean I'll always be the same age I was then which isn't possible because I'm older now but I think, like Dylan said: "Oh, but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now." And that got me started thinking about Dylan and the 'sixties which got really complicated so I felt like Suzanne and no one could touch my perfect body except Larry and it wasn't with his mind and I don't like parts of me, like my neck is too short and Larry would have been gross but I was thinking that he'd transmuted and become Leonard Cohen and he'd make me very famous by writing songs about me which my parents would hate after I died which would be soon because that fucking organic acid was making me feel like I was about to explode.

At that point I may have just crawled off to the woods to die but the girl's volleyball coach, Ms. Trowel, arrived and began to ask these really existential questions like "Why are you naked?" and then she asked Larry, "Why is she naked?" but Larry was face down in moss, this mulch, like he was trying to become soil and then Ms. Trowel ignored him anyway because after all he was a guy and Ms. Trowel wasn't all that interested in guys. Most of us didn't mind Ms. Trowel because being girls at this stupid private school, no one paid much attention to us. The boys got all the money in the sports budget to do things like play soccer in the Soviet Union and hockey in Finland. Ms. Trowel wasn't a pervert like the guy teachers who pretended to be all worried about you and then backed you into walls and said things like: "I can really relate to your pain."

I mean even if Ms. Trowel was a dyke like Gertrude Stein at least she didn't treat us like morons. Like children which we never were. Except for Debbie Liberty who tried to start a pep club and only one person went and he was meant to be in Driver's Ed. Debbie kept announcing pep rallies during homeroom when everyone was hung over or pretending to be and finally she just shut up and stopped saying: "Hey, you guys! Where's your spirit?" when Bradley Moffat suggested she might feel more comfortable in public school where kids did weird shit.

The thing was, I wasn't sure why I was naked and since I'd left the ice pool I could feel myself turning blue although I couldn't actually feel my body or anything since I'd eaten that organic acid. So I put my clothes back on and Larry separated from the mulch and for some reason Ms. Trowel left us alone and I went back to the dance and the record stuck and the word "dark" was repeated twenty times which made me peak again and it was so cool just sitting in the corner throwing marshmallows at Bitsy Binderman saying "Dark" and then "Bitsy" and then throwing a marshmallow.

Larry was on the roof of the rec building receiving telepathic messages from an alien life force so I wandered off again and spent the rest of the night inside the part of the tree where all the branches intersect. There was definitely something happening with red ants.

The next morning Lisa Sommers turned me into the Honor Committee for my own good she said but I know it was because I called her a major blimp and also for the stuff about Carter Sykes which I forgot but sensed to be unflattering. The headmaster, Duncan Blodgett, smiled very hard and said:

"I understand you may have been under the influence of mind-altering substances."

And I said: "Three hits of purple haze and a jam jar full of Glenfiddich."

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Mr. Blodgett looked confused and coughed and smiled harder and called me Amy (my name is Emily): "Amy," he said, "you're a nice girl."

Maybe he thought I was my sister. Her name is Amanda and she's not a nice girl either but she never took LSD on a school function.

But this sobriety thing? Well, this was all pretty normal. I mean normal for me. Like this was the first time I ever took acid and I gather three hits was a lot but I never was what you'd call a social drinker. What I'm trying to say is, some people are trouble straight but drunk they're like a natural disaster; a typhoon or an earthquake or one of those Texas ice storms that come from nowhere and when the sun comes out again the cars are piled up and everybody's dead. People shake their heads and wonder if they have insurance.

But the real reason I quit was Larry Feinstein. He didn't come back from that mulch thing and they couldn't get him off the rec building until Mr. Foster, the 10th grade college advisor, pretended to be on "Star Trek" and did the entire Tribble episode with Larry playing Captain Kirk and Mr. Foster had to be everybody else including the women. □

MICHAEL O'ROURKE

Little Creek

The little creek that winds past my apartment building ends, in a sense, where it begins—in the underground drainage system of the university where I teach. Its origins are in the network of streams and caves that coil through the subsurface limestone in this region, which was formed in ancient seas about 350,000,000 years ago. That subsurface now is overlain with the blacktop of the basketball arena parking lot, formed about 20 years ago, and with the network of campus and city streets that stretch beyond. The creek's beginnings are now pipes, its point of emergence a concrete culvert, its flow-rate determined by urban runoff. It makes a continuous getaway from this source—wriggles free—and yet remains, in a sense, a fugitive on the run.

Its name is, in fact, Little Creek.

Well, not exactly; creeks are cagey.

The three-quarter-mile snippet that loops around my street, creating a cul-de-sac, doesn't even appear on topographical maps. It tiptoes past apartments, small businesses, a few houses; slips through brush and thickets, then ducks behind a rock and dives underground. It seems to reappear on the other side of a rise about a half-mile farther north (where the mapped Little Creek begins) in the form of a streambed that winds through woods and pastureland for another mile until water surfaces again from beneath the half-exposed roots of a listing cottonwood. In reality, however, it hangs a sharp east, burrows for a couple of miles beneath the fluster and fuss of the small American city overhead, and re-emerges on the side of a hill at the base of an outcropping of rock, where it escapes, as if by design, the housing development above into the quiet of an undisturbed glen. Here its name is not "little" anything but Big Spring (at least to the locals, for again it isn't mapped), having roughly doubled in volume and pouring from the side of that hill. It then either immediately intersects with the officially acknowledged stream it will become, or soon but not immediately, or it is that acknowledged stream, depending upon the maps you read, the ground you tread, and you—whereupon, a meandering ten miles later, and now returning west, "it," the official stream (which actually is a fork of a larger fork of a larger river, but that's another river), joins its companion branch, one of whose tributaries, also hailing from the east, and "starting" at that cottonwood, is Little Creek.

Yes, cagey.

My three-quarter-mile snippet doesn't actually have a name, not even to the locals, but I've dubbed it Little Creek because it seems to flow to that stream and because, according to a geologist friend, it likely once did. Streams, both above ground and below, merge and divide; land rises and falls, and there is evidence, says my friend, of an ancient valley connecting "my" Little Creek with the one on the map. To the extent that streams can be dated at all—since they do shift around so much—this prehistoric creek existed one to six million years ago, quenching the thirsts of woolly mammoths and saber-toothed tigers. Time passed, water flowed, and then, at some indistinct subsequent point, having reached soluble limestone, the creek tunneled its way underground, burrowing off in a different direction and leaving my snippet behind like the tip of a tail.

Its environment, of course, has changed markedly

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during the period of time following that small event. The only mammoths in the area now are the bulldozers lumbering over the ground outside my backdoor, making way for more apartments, and the saber-toothed tigers have since shrunk, although they still like to drink, as do my two, at the creek's banks. The trees lining those banks—locust, elm, box elder, sycamore, sassafrass, yellow poplar—are all native to this part of the country, but they suggest the hardwood forest of which their forebears were once a part, the way a thread suggests the blanket that once comprised it. The creek itself does contain at least one snapping turtle, who I saw peering up at me from its greeny depths one day, but seems richer now in trash forms than life forms. You could furnish a humble dwelling or construct a vehicle of sorts from the domestic debris scattered along its course. It's just a depository now, a drainage ditch and garbage dump, superfluous to its environment except as a siphon. Once upon a time it was an important part of its surroundings; now it's surrounded and ignored.

A Fun Karts franchise ("Go-Carts and Batting Cages, Bumper-boats and Video Games, Big-Screen TV") is one of its neighbors. It sits on the creek's west bank where the creek emerges from the culvert that channels it under the street next to the parking lot that overlays its subsurface beginnings. Yellow batting-cage balls that have escaped from their cages tumble down the creek-bank and are carried, when it rains, downstream. They come to rest wherever they've landed when the water level drops—half-submerged in stagnant backwaters, half-hidden in viney thickets,wedged between two rocks or two chunks of concrete. If I were an enterprising ten-year-old, I'd collect those balls and sell them back to the Fun Karts man: adventure and commerce combined. But adventure for the kids at Fun Karts isn't exploring a winding creek; it's buzzing around in circles on a blacktop track. It's floating in plastic boats in an above-ground metal tank and peering, not at turtles, but dancing electrons. It's hitting plastic balls with aluminum bats in wire cages and never wondering where the balls that escape end up

Then there are the "Eagle Creek" apartments on the stream's opposite bank (mine are a "Village" farther downstream) that, no, aren't named for the creek since the creek is nameless except in the would-be poetical mind of some developer, nor for the eagles in the area, the sightings of which exist somewhere on the outside limits of rare, but for the college's sports mascot, the golden eagle, a purported specimen of which sits stuffed in the student union—*purported* since it's actually, a birder friend tells me, an immature bald. My two-story brick "village" sits in a bend of not-Eagle Creek, not-feeling very communal, the tenants coming and going without speaking, a short nod the most that is usually ever exchanged. This is possibly the result of the climate of fear and anxiety created by the message loudly painted on the apartment dumpster: *TeNATs ONLY Will BE PROSCUTeD.* I've not witnessed any arrests, but our ovate landlady is careful to maintain an air of officialness about the place by not walking the total of forty or fifty yards from her townhouse across the parking lot to her office but driving it in her gleaming, crimson Jeep Cherokee.

Has she ever wanted to look at the creek?

But creeks are cagey.

Soon after it gives the town the slip by tunneling underground, then re-emerging as Big Spring, it hooks up with (or becomes) the East Blackburn Fork of the Roaring River. Its confidence restored, it trips along through pastures and fields till it reaches the Blackburn Fork, where it becomes officially—and actually too—"scenic," complete with swift-running water and two brands of trout. Next it meets the Roaring River, which isn't roaring at this point in its journey but more resting-up-from-all-the-exertion, rounds a couple of bends and opens suddenly on the Cumberland River, a considerably larger affair on its way—by an exceedingly serpentine route—to the fabled Ohio. Back and forth it goes, dipping south, then angling north, taking its time for hundreds of miles on its anything-but-how-the-crow-flies westward course, until at tiny Smithland, Kentucky, with no more fanfare than is provided by a pair of fishermen afloat in their skiff, it joins the Ohio.

But now the pace picks up. No sooner does it reach the Ohio (giving Paducah a passing glance) than the mighty Mississippi comes into view, a horizon of water thundering single-mindedly south. It joins the torrent just below Cairo and is swept along past Hickman, Caruthersville, Osceola, towns and cities being left behind like backwater driftwood. Memphis soon appears and is just as quickly gone; Vicksburg is a distant memory of a distant battle. And all the while the momentum builds as other rivers join the march—the Arkansas, the Yazoo, the Red. What's the hurry? Why this headlong rush through locks and dams, past bridges, levees, docks, pleasant riverfront parks? Where are we headed with such inexorable resolve? Then New Orleans, then the delta, and, yes, now we know. There it is—the Gulf of Mexico, the sea. □

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VIRGIL SUAREZ

Talo & the Coupe de Ville

As driver for Tejedor Y Su Grupo, Talo made a steady living. It was being on the road that attracted him to driving as work. That and the fact that he loved his car. I remember the shine on the chrome, the glint and smoothness of the leather interior He let me climb inside and pretend I could drive. The radio worked so we listened to music. Sometimes he let me help him wash the car. Not being tall enough to do the hood, I was only able to clean the side doors and the tires. The tires, because it was always raining and he drove into puddles, were the dirtiest, grimiest part of the car. In return for leaving them spotless, he let me drive-pretend. Talo lived with Esperanza, Yiya and Gustavo's ex-daughter in law, our neighbors in Havana. Actually, my parents said that Esperanza and Yiya and Gustavo's son never got divorced. Esperanza's husband left for the United States one day, with their only son, so Esperanza, who didn't want to leave the country and couldn't find another place to live, stayed on with Yiya and Gustavo. They didn't like each other anymore, especially now that she lived with Talo. Though I never saw the inside of the house, only their back yard when Tejedor visited, my parents said the house was divided in two, with a makeshift wall made of plaster and cardboard. Sometimes Talo and Esperanza went off on trips and that's when Gustavo drank *aguardiente*, got drunk, and then played *decimas güajiras* to Yiya. My parents hated those songs more because they couldn't stand the way Gustavo slurred the words as he sang: "*Buche y pluma, na' ma' tenia me mi novia, buche y pluma na' ma'*." I remember this one time I was up on the fence and Esperanza was hanging the laundry to dry on the line. She was always telling me to be careful, that I would fall one day and break my head open. (It never happened, not on this way, anyway, years later, I would break my arm as I walked-balanced on a wrought-iron fence.) I turned my attention to her when she drew closer to me on the line. I asked her something or other about Talo's underwear and she got mad. She called me a *cabroncito*, which I interpreted as diminutive for little goat. Then I told her what I always told her in sing-song, which is why she hated me so much. "Esperanza, Esperanza, *esta sin-ga*'!" It meant something like Esperanza is without gas, but of course it was a play on *singada*, which meant she was fucked. Then she shot back a mad-as-hell glance and told me she was going to tell my mother what a brat I was. Talo and Esperanza are still together as far as I know, living in the same house Yiya and Gustavo left behind when they died. I remember them for two reasons: one because of Talo's Coupe de Ville, which ended up taking us to the airport when we left Cuba, and the other because Esperanza always threatened me with the fact that one day I would pay her back for the grief and insults. Thirty odd years later, remembrance becomes a form of penitence and payment. □

CORI JONES

Priests

The spring I turned sixteen, my sister Kathleen took me to church. She was just back from Pittsburgh and she said only city girls wore heels like mine. She said we should go to church; she hadn't been once since she left and God only knew about me. When we walked into Mass she made the sign of the cross, rubbed at the lipstick on her mouth. We sat up front in a pew full of women. The priest stood over us and raised his hand. I looked down so he wouldn't see my eyes. My shoes and the carpet were the same deep red. If he saw me look up he'd know everything I did. He'd see me go down to the lake in the dark, dance with the trees when the moon came up. That night I left the light on, sucked my knuckles when I fell into sleep. Kathleen came into my room at dawn, shook me awake in bird cries and light. You're not my sister, she hissed. When she slapped my face I tasted blood in my mouth. When the sun got high I put on flat shoes. I walked to the park across from the church and stood over a man sitting on the grass. Under his shirt his muscles were smooth. His hair and skin were pale in the sun. He wanted to be a priest, he told me. I turned away from him, then back. Behind us I heard bells count to twelve. Priests, I whispered. I told him priests needed the night and maybe we could walk after dark. That night by the lake I felt his fingers brush my hair. The clouds kept changing shapes. I knelt before him in blue earth, both of us pale in a circle of moon. I said you don't know what you want to be you don't know and the clouds spread like wings. My toes curled around pebbles and moss. I made my mouth round and pulled him out of himself. God! he cried and I choked on hot salt. He fell against me, hit me with his fists. He cried God! God! and I heard us both sobbing. The wind came up and I ran. The next morning I went to church alone. I sat in the back, watched the women in the front pew. I saw the priest's hand, his face pale as noon. Domine, he said, and I tasted salt water. The pews moved like waves and I couldn't feel my feet. Domine, domine, and my shoes and the carpet oozed red. Red rain fell on the cross, on the altar, on the women in front. They shrugged their shoulders and stared at the priest. With their free hands they brushed wet shiny dust from their hair. □

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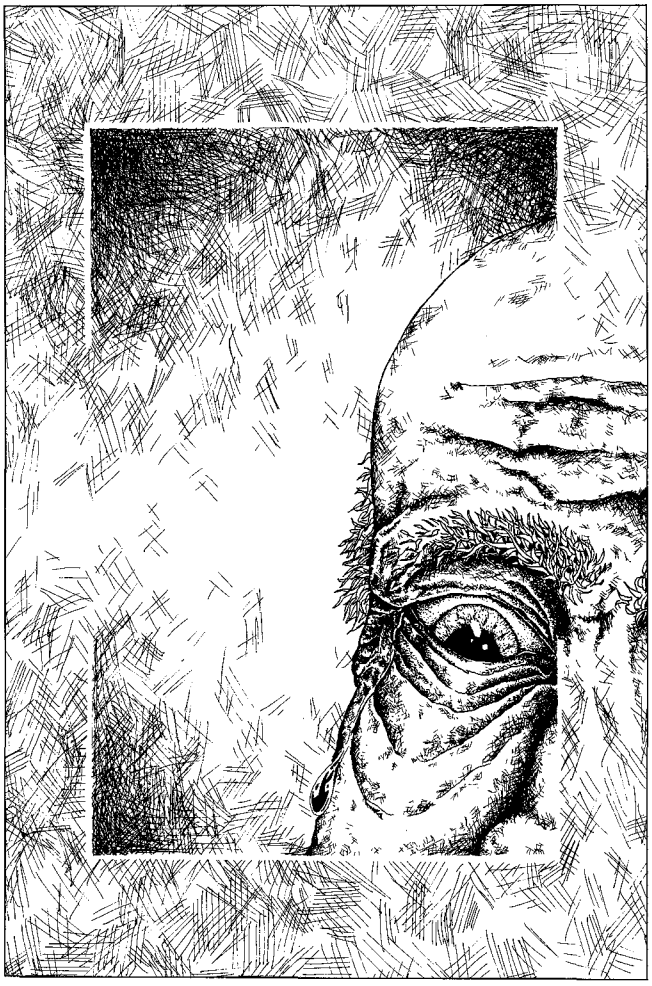

Man in Chair with Book

A Story by Peter Cherches

It's a good thing I have a sense of humor about this sort of thing, he thought, a minute or two into it. This sort of thing? After he thought it, he wondered, is this like anything I have faced before? Immediately, he remembered the heart palpitations. That was about twenty years ago, he remembered. They had started on the subway, on his return trip from work, he was working at Viking at the time, and they had continued for more than a day, and then they stopped, and that was it, he never again had a problem with heart palpitations, it was the first time and the last time.

Is this something like that? he wondered. Is this thing something like a panic attack? he wondered. He had never been plagued by panic attacks. I don't think it was a panic attack back then, twenty years ago, he thought. He had thought it then and he thought it now. He had no cause for panic this time. He hadn't that time either, as far as he could tell. Yet, of course, he had heard that panic attacks don't necessarily stem from logical causes. Yes, but certainly there is a panicky disposition, he thought, and I don't have one of those. Certainly, were I to panic now, there would be a logical explanation. I should be perfectly within my rights to panic now, of course. I would panic *because* of what happened, he thought, but I can't imagine that it happened because I had panicked in the first place, he thought. In fact, he thought, who could imagine conditions less conducive to panic? A perfectly relaxing afternoon, spent in a chair, by a window, with a Penguin Classics edition of Montaigne's *Essays*.

What had happened, a few minutes before, was that he, all of a sudden, froze. Sitting in the chair, by the window, reading a Penguin Classics paperback edition of selected essays of Montaigne, at page 196, he just froze, unable to move a muscle. That was his realization, however many seconds or fractions of a second it is after such an occurrence that one realizes such a thing. "I can't move a muscle" was exactly how he had phrased this realization to himself. And, I'm worried, he thought. He had quickly realized that he was breathing. Then, in a sense, I *can* move a muscle, he thought. I assume, he thought, that breathing, to some degree at least, requires the cooperation of muscles. Of course, I'm not an expert, but this has to be a good sign.

That was when he thought, it's a good thing I have a sense of humor about this sort of thing, and remembered the heart palpitations. It was also when he discovered that he could not scream for help, that he could not vocalize.

This is the kind of thing that makes you think it might be nice to have a wife, he thought. When you can't move a muscle a wife could be a comforting thing. He hadn't had a wife for twenty-three years. Elisa had left him in the 'seventies, after ten years of marriage. That was how he had always conceptualized it, that she

BENJAMIN SIGMUND

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had left him, not that they had split up. She left, got married again, had children, two, one of each. Kristen, the younger one, Elisa had told him recently, they had never lost touch, was applying to Smith, Berkeley, and Northwestern.

It was an abstract wife that he thought of now, somebody who might rescue him. You don't think about these things when everything's going well, he thought, but if I had a wife now she'd probably be here with me and do whatever had to be done. Or, if for some reason she wasn't here she'd come back soon enough and find me before it's too late. Even if she were away or something she'd probably call to see how I was, and when I didn't answer she'd get worried and come back, hopefully quick enough to find me before it's too late, he thought.

I'm breathing just fine, he thought. Well, maybe a little shortness of breath, he thought, but that's got to be natural at a time like this. There's bound to be some anxiety when you can't, for all intents and purposes, move a muscle. And he thought, I have to pee.

If I had known this was going to happen I wouldn't have had that second cup of coffee, he thought. He thought, if I could laugh I would have to laugh, because how can you think something like if I had known this was going to happen I wouldn't have had that second cup of coffee and not laugh. And then he thought again, I have to pee, and he realized he still had bladder control. Breathing and bladder control, he thought, all is not lost.

Relax or struggle, he wondered, what's the best approach? To struggle, to try to force my arms to move, or my legs, might lead somewhere, he thought. Sure, I've *tried* to move all along, but perhaps I haven't given it my all. Then he thought of Gandhi and India. Maybe relaxing is the better approach. Maybe this whole thing is the result of tension, he considered. Struggling might make it worse, he thought, though he couldn't think of what worse might be. Relaxation could be the key, he thought. So he tried to relax.

Exactly how to relax, he wasn't sure. Was he thinking of a physical thing or a mental thing? he wondered. He couldn't, as far as he could tell, relax his muscles, he seemed to have no control over his muscles, except for his bladder, which he assumed was something like a muscle if not technically one, and he didn't want to relax his bladder, not yet, at least. He seemed to have no control over his breathing, he couldn't figure out how to breathe more slowly, or more deeply. Perhaps it was a matter of attitude, he thought. So he tried to adopt a relaxed attitude. But he had no idea how to do that. I may not be a panicky type, he thought, but I don't think I've ever had a relaxed attitude. What would that be like? Would it be a meditation kind of thing, a total clearing of the mind? He couldn't imagine what that would be like. He had never meditated. His mind had never been clear.

And then he noticed something else: that his eyes could focus, and they could move. That must involve muscles too, he thought. His head was immobile, and his eyes were focused on the paragraph he had been reading when it happened, and he read it again.

"I have always an idea in my mind, a certain confused picture, which shows me, as in a dream, a better form than I have used; but I cannot grasp it and develop it. And even this idea is only on a middling plane. From this I conclude that the works of those rich and great minds of ancient days are very far beyond the utmost stretch of my hopes and imagination. Their writings not only satisfy me to the full, but astound me and strike me with wonder. I appreciate their beauty; I see, if not the whole, at least so much that I cannot possibly aspire to equal it. Whatever I undertake, I owe a sacrifice to the Graces, as Plutarch says of someone, to obtain their favour,

si quid enim placet
si quid dulce hominum sensibus influit,
debentur lepidis omnia Gratiis.†"

He had frozen at that quote from the Latin. Now he noticed that his eyes could drop to the bottom of the page, to read the translation: "'For, if anything pleases, if anything sweetly influences the mortal senses, all is due to the charming Graces.' Source unknown." Source unknown, he thought, how fitting.

What's the source of what has happened to me? he wondered. Is there an explanation? He had asked the cardiologist at the hospital the same thing, twenty years ago, when the palpitations stopped. What's the explanation?

"Have you ever had any trouble like this before?" the doctor had asked.

"Not that I can think of," he told the doctor.

"Well, if it doesn't happen again you have nothing to worry about," the doctor told him. And then he said to the doctor, "Yes, but why did it happen?" And the doctor replied, "These things happen." The answer reminded him of a Henny Youngman joke, the one that ends with "So don't lift your arm!"

He was feeling the pressure in his bladder, really had to pee, he could let go, just pee, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. It was a dignity thing. Better to suffer, as long as I can hold it in, he thought. Who knows, maybe I'll snap out of it, any minute now, he thought. Then I can walk to the toilet and have a good long pee. It was a blissful fantasy.

I love this chair, my reading chair, he thought. I don't want to piss all over my reading chair. I spent months, going from store to store, test driving reading

†All quotations from Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, translated by J.M. Cohen (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1958), pp. 196-7.

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chairs, twenty-one years ago, he thought, and I found this one at a shop near Union Square, I can't remember the name. It's the perfect reading chair, the perfect contours, for extended reading.

He thought: I must look like a Duane Hanson sculpture. This stock still, slightly paunchy, grayish, balding, somewhat intellectual-looking, fifty-eight-year-old, freelance copy editor, wearing a plaid flannel shirt, jeans, and thick white socks, no shoes, frozen in a chair, by a window, in a West Village apartment, on a Friday afternoon, reading the essays of Montaigne. It could be worse, he thought, at least I'm reading Montaigne.

It could have been the newspaper, after all. News gets stale very quickly.

The pressure in the bladder was building up. It's one of the few things I can still control, he thought, I'm not ready to give in.

His eyes were able to scan the entire two-page spread. Above the translation of the quote from source unknown was another footnote, another translation from the Latin: "'When I re-read them, I am ashamed of having written them, because I see so many things that I, as their author, think should be bundled away.' Ovid, *Ex Ponto*, I, V, 15." The essay he was reading was titled, "On Presumption."

He decided to skip around. Unable to turn the page, he had hardly any incentive to read in a linear fashion. He read the last paragraph on page 197.

"Now my language has no ease or grace; it is rough and contemptuous, free and irregular in its arrangement; and my inclination, if not my judgement, likes it so. But I am well aware that sometimes I let myself go too far, and that by trying to avoid art and affectation, I fall into them on the other side:"

How appropriate: paralyzed with a two-page spread, and the last paragraph ends with a colon.

Am I worrying enough, he wondered, or am I worrying too much? He wasn't sure how much longer he could keep from peeing. It *would* be one less thing to worry about if he got it over with, he thought. And isn't there some danger of, what do they call it, uremic poisoning? he wondered. But he had held it in longer than this before. But, of course, he was never paralyzed those other times. What would be better, he wondered, to pee, or not to pee? Holding it in proves I still have some kind of control, he told himself. Letting it relax would probably be a great relief, except that I'd be all wet, and smelly, and the chair would get all wet and smelly. Not yet, he thought.

Freelancing is another problem, he thought. If you have an office job, and you don't show up, and you don't call, they get worried, and they try to call you, and if they don't get you, maybe they get worried enough to send somebody to your home to see if you're all right. Assuming it happens on a work day. If I had an office job I would have been there when it happened, he thought, assuming it would have happened at the same time, in a different place, assuming it would have happened at all if I weren't sitting here by the window reading Montaigne, he thought. It's starting to get dark, he thought.

The job he was doing now, a freelance job for Farrar, Straus, was due on Monday. That might be a problem, he thought.

What would it have been like if he and Elisa had stayed together and had children? he wondered. Maybe one of them would be here now, Elisa or one of our children, and I wouldn't be paralyzed in a chair with a paperback edition of Montaigne trying not to pee and wondering am I going to die in this chair. I'd probably be in a hospital, or in an ambulance on my way to one. What would those twenty-three years have been like? he wondered.

He looked at the book again: "It needs at least as much accomplishment to develop an empty theme as to sustain a weighty one." Montaigne, he thought, I can't imagine a writer I'd rather be paralyzed with.

"Paralyzed" was the word, he had realized, that best described his state. I am paralyzed, he thought. I am paralyzed, I can't move a muscle, except for the fact that I can breathe, I can move my eyes, and I have bladder control. And the bladder control is a mixed blessing.

He was beginning to believe that he could die, in the chair by the window.

He tried to concentrate on moving. He came up with a game plan. Probably better to start small, he thought, to focus everything on a finger, for instance. Which finger? he wondered. He began to think of each finger, one by one, and remember how it moved. He decided on the index finger of his left hand. It seemed like the one that moved most naturally, the pointing finger. Being left-handed, the left index finger seemed the logical choice to him. He had to try it. He concentrated on moving his left index finger. He tried to will his left index finger to move. He thought, left index finger, left index finger, left index finger—MOVE! But it didn't move.

He felt himself becoming dizzy, and he thought this might be related to holding in his urine. The possibility of uremic poisoning was starting to concern him, and he began to seriously consider giving in and pissing himself. Soon, maybe, but not yet, he thought.

Montaigne: "I do not know how to please or to delight, or to amuse; the best story in the world becomes dry and withers in my hands."

He had, until this point, considered it a temporary thing. Some kind of psychosomatic reaction that he would snap out of, or, through the help of medical science, would be cured of. He had also entertained the possibility of death. But now another possibility suggested itself: perhaps I am paralyzed for life, he thought. I am frightened, he thought.

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"When I attempt some popular or lighter theme, it is to follow my own inclination—since I do not care for a formal and gloomy wisdom, as the world does—and to enliven myself, not my style, which is better suited to a grave and serious theme; always supposing that I can give the name of style to a formless and irregular utterance, a popular jargon that runs on without definitions, without divisions, without conclusions, and is as vague as that of Amafanius and Rabirius." Montaigne.

Just then something happened. As a tear dropped from the corner of his left eye, he became aware that he could cry.

Breathing, bladder control, eye movement, and now crying, he thought. Surely all is not lost.

Am I crying from the realization that I am paralyzed, or from the agony of the bladder, or both? he wondered. And he also wondered, does it really matter?

He began to wonder what life would be like, paralyzed. I suppose I'll need feeding tubes, and catheters, and constant care, he thought. He wondered whether he had bowel control. He wasn't sure, but he suspected he might not.

I'll need a page turner, he thought.

As glad as one can be under such circumstances, he was glad he didn't have a family. He would not have wanted to be a burden to a wife and children. I wasn't cut out to be a vegetable, he thought.

What would Montaigne have to say at a time like this? he wondered. His eyes scanned the pages and came upon this sentence: "And yet we must tune the string to every kind of note; and the sharpest is the one that is most rarely touched."

Several minutes later, the phone rang. On the fourth ring the answering machine picked it up. He waited. After about twenty seconds of silence he heard a beep, then the message.

"Carl? It's Tony. I'm assuming dinner is still on for tomorrow night. Unless I hear from you otherwise, I'll be at your place at about seven, I think that's what we said. Don't you buy wine. I'll bring the wine. I don't know what you're making, but if I don't hear from you I'm bringing white. Uh, O.K., see you then. Ciao."

He had forgotten that he had invited Tony to dinner. Now he knew that somebody was coming, though it would be more than twenty-four hours before Tony arrived. When he didn't answer the door, Tony would not go away, he was sure (he hoped he was right). Tony would get some help, and they would break down the door. Probably the best he could hope for was that they would find him in a pool of urine, paralyzed, exhausted, or more likely passed out, dehydrated, looking awful, clutching a Penguin Classics paperback edition of Montaigne's *Essays*, open to pages 196 and 197. His choice of reading matter, he was sure, would prove no embarrassment. □

MARK DEFOE

Mall Monsters—Male

Caps backwards, jackboots and flapping clown pants, they hang,
babbling boards, babes, video games. Little
Rascals with beepers, Bowery Boys too badass,
too post literate to crack wise, they affect hard

disenchantment, so mellow, unbuzzed by warm
fuzzy isms. Scrawny pirates, they pierce their flesh
with trinkets of rebellion, ornament their arms
with hex signs for that bogeyman adulthood.

They raid the malls for cool, they strut their irony,
clinging to lank girls in boas and net stocking.
Yet when they ask for the time, their voices peep, half
mockery, half reverence. Their shaven skulls

seem bruised and fragile, their necks like twigs,
their skin sallow in the mall's relentless sunshine.

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True Dirt

PERRY GLASSER

The Least You Need to Know: Stories, by Lee Martin (Sarabande). $13.95

Home is the Hunter and Other Stories, by Meg Files (John Daniel). $10

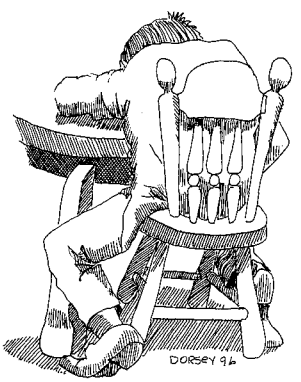
Same Place, Same Things: Stories, by Tim Gautreaux (St. Martin's). $20.95

IN A CONFESSIONAL AGE, everyone wants true dirt. Even sophisticated readers demand a return on the time they invest reading fiction, perhaps insider knowledge of a presidential campaign or the precise tactics of nuclear submarine strategy. In other times, when fiction's charge was to create more a confirmation of the ordinary, readers looked to writers to penetrate reality to a Truth beyond the plainly evident. That was what an artist was—a magus who dispelled mist, presented the world stripped of illusion, and invoked the spirit, unadorned, as if new. Conrad implored the writer to make the reader "see." Only an idiot could think he meant exclusively with the eyes.

But the overwhelming rising tide of visual media has made witnesses of us all. "To see" has somehow become a synonym for "to know." We're preoccupied with the surface, the things we see on flat screens. Gossip magazines are our cutural family albums of what our relatives, those wacky celebrities, are up to. Since it just won't do to have us think a story we are about to consume is simply made up, we have television movies that are promoted with claims of historical validity: An announcer intones, "based on actual events" and somehow the two hour travails of a mother or the anxieties of tourists held by terrorists makes a more serious demand upon us than any dumb-ass imaginary story. Based on actual events. Geez. Imagine Tolstoy's publicist, boots up on an office desk, schmoozing an insecure exec from Fox-TV that *War and Peace* was "based on a true story," thus assuring an audience for those madcap kids, Natasha, Andrey and Pierre. What, for heaven's sake, *isn't* based on actual events?

The Least You Need to Know is not only a title, it's the aesthetic that gives short fiction its special quality. You know—compression and understatement. They are the most important weapons in the arsenal of naturalism. Hemingway killed a few lions and floated 20th century fiction away on a whole damned iceberg of technique.

Lee Martin has technique down, well . . . cold. So you want to like Lee Martin's stories, and you want to be able to say wonderful things about them, but after reading the graceful prose, appreciating the moments chosen for dramatization and nodding your head with recognition at the precisely etched characters, you remember your mother's admonition about cookies: one or two are O.K., but too much of a good thing can make you ill. What can you say? This collection should be more satisfying than it is.



I like Lee Martin's work. I really do. But Martin's fiction is strongest when he writes the quasi-fictional memoir that has come to pass for creativity. You know, the kind of thing that receives praise for being "closely observed." If the technique is solid, the only thing that can go wrong with a story that is closely observed is that it is under-imagined. This collection is an award-winner from Sarabande Books, and, to put it plainly, while Martin has stories that are *not* told from the point of view of a late adolescent boy who is an only child and whose parents are under marital strain, those stories are here just to fill out the collection. Amy Bloom's foreword tells us that "Lee Martin's aunt let him know she wasn't real happy with what he's done with the family stories," so we have no reason to doubt that the moving line that separates fiction from memoir in Martin's work came to rest awful close to the memoir side. We're reading the true dirt.

The stories seem effortlessly accomplished. The complaint here is not with the writer, but with his conscious choice to mine a certain sameness. In the family stories, the drama always occurs between Mom and Dad and is only dimly felt or seen by the son. Father is more crude than Mother and has to make his way in the world in some realm not overly delicate—as an undertaker or as the man who "cleans up crime scenes." There's an adult interloper, possibly a lover taken by Mother, who at least pretends to prefer the finer things of life and so offers Mother a diversion. We feel the hand of the writer massaging reality a bit, as in each story some character gets a pithy remark that feels suspiciously like a theme. The remark is so wholly appropriate for the character, so fitting a character's vocation, that it goes past startling to annoying. A barber says, "You get a knack for seeing people for what they are. Secrets? Forget it. A

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snip here, a snip there, and I get down to the scalp." Most of the barbers I know are better at handicapping horse races than they are at creating appropriate metaphors about their world view.

Structurally, because of the task he has set himself, Lee Martin's best stories again and again collapse on passages that must disrupt the narrative to make sure we get the point: "Years and years have gone by since then, but still I can remember the most unusual things . . ." and a paragraph later, "Even now, when all along I have known this point in my story would come, it stuns me, . . ." and a paragraph after that, "But that night . . . ." Since the kid is no more than a witness but the adult is writing, Martin feels free to stop the narrative dead, do a little minuet of interpretation, and then like a radio-show announcer after the commercial intone, "And now, back to our story."

The strongest emotions we read in Lee Martin's fiction are dim disquietude; the most powerful events are moments of retrospective recognition. Granted, some readers will find this charming and wise, but overfeeding on three or four such stories too soon near each other will leave you feeling queasy and wondering if you haven't something better to do. Clean the oven, maybe. Paint the garage.

Of course, I write out of certain biases about the nature of naturalism, that fiction wrought in transparent language seeking to show us life as it is lived: that plot should clutch us at the throat, leaving us with dread and a desperate need to know what will happen next, that characters should be active agents with the chance to master their lives, that the choices presented to free agents will often plunge them into conflict or unfamiliar moral terrain, that conflict of purpose and principle will carry us to a realm where fiction plumbs the human spirit, and that drawing so near to the crucible of Truth will leave us unmistakably certain that the lives we have visited will for their struggles never again be the same. I'm aware that a lot of writers and critics are eager to call these assumptions into question, and I am aware that those same writers and critics will wonder in what cave I've been hibernating for the past decade or so, but I am also aware that the audience for contemporary serious short fiction is shrinking dangerously close to the point where the only consumers are also practitioners. When the audience for whom writers write are other writers, it's no wonder that anyone with an actual story to tell dreams of cobbling a screenplay. If you doubt this audience shrinkage, open any of the journals that regularly announce contests, grants and prizes, run your eye down the lists of recent winners, and see if you are consumed by a burning desire to obtain copies of the sponsoring magazines. If the $500 prize winners are read only by family and friends out of a sense of obligation, think of the fate of the published work that has no laurels. Subdued tone may win prizes, garner guest readings and assuage the gods of tenure, but it surely will never be great literature.

Home is the Hunter and Other Stories by Meg Files pursues true dirt of another kind. At times the dirt seems a bit manufactured, but mostly it has the feel of being true enough. If you've ever had a day where everything and everyone you come across seems ripe with meaning beyond itself, then you will recognize what these stories are about.

Take "The Living Desert," the second story in the collection. A young woman moves from California to Tucson, Arizona, takes a position in a community college, and shortly after that has an affair with an art teacher that results in his proposal of marriage. This is the stuff of Jane Austen, and mighty good stuff that is, but instead of characters who take risks to achieve what they desire, and instead of mounting tension and successive scenes that culminate in a confrontation, the story is about its own symbolic superstructure.

When she was quite young, Nicky Feldman, the protagonist new to the desert had a father who drowned in the sea. The artist she almost marries has a hot tub he keeps empty. Nicky says of herself, "Empty just means waiting to be filled. Empty isn't an unpleasant state." But later in the story we learn the reason the hot tub is kept drained is that shortly after his son's death, the artist committed an indiscretion in the hot tub. When she thinks of his dry hot tub, she takes a drink. The lovers journey from the desert floor into nearby mountains and spend time by a pool of water. Later, looking at the photo he took of her and her reflection, Nicky says, "Like the water is a doorway to another world."

Get it? Water? The desert? Death? Well, if you do, so what? It's just one of those days when everything seems to mean more than it is. Wait a while; the fit will pass. Since the characters don't so much want something as the writer requires them to perceive what the writer requires them to perceive, not much by way of events happens in such a story. There's no confrontation; Nicky pretends to be asleep as her lover uses the toilet and leaves. Instead of drama, we get the requisite final moment of revelation, a final sentence that says, "[She knew] now how to live in the blue water," but if there is a reader who actually understands or cares what that means, or precisely how because of this failed love affair Nicky's life will indeed change—well, may we all be blessed with such readers.

Meg Files writes with considerable skill and a touch of poetry in her prose. It's pleasant to read, "The curves of their lives grazed each other maybe once a year," and when she needs to evoke a word picture she can do so swiftly and perfectly, so there are the pleasures of fine writing to be had in this volume. "The Mill Pond" is perhaps the strongest story in the collection, but again a symbolic superstructure rises so close to the surface that the story feels overworked. A story that has a family van flipped off the road and underwater with the children trapped and about to drown while mother

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and father can escape doesn't need to hang on quicksand as a metaphor for emotional bonds.

Meg Files stitches stories together to a pre-determined pattern, or one that she perhaps discovers on the umpteenth rewrite. You just wish she'd leave the characters alone and let the story go on. Less art makes better fiction.

In *Same Place, Same Things*, Tim Gautreaux knows how to get out of a story's way and just let the characters do what they need to do. And it is *need*; the writer is that good. These characters move through the world compelled by important motive. The characterizations are swift and precise, rooted in gesture, speech and action. None of Gautreaux's people seem to be prepackaged and ready from central characterization via university workshop and the stamp of political approval. In the title story, a farm wife greets a pump repairman "(by looking) him over as though he were a goat she might or might not buy." She's a dangerous woman, but we only gradually learn that, and the pay-off is not the realization but the ensuing violence.

Gautreaux is so good he allows himself to play at storytelling. This is a writer having serious fun. In "Died and Gone to Las Vegas," a bunch of working people on a steam dredge in the mouth of the Mississippi play bourré, a kind of Cajun poker. Just as in life, the point is not the game, but the talk around it, and the writer simply allows each of the players a turn to tell a tale just within the borders of believable, and as outrageous and bizarre as the stories are, they nevertheless only enhance our appreciation for the tellers as well as the larger issue—the human condition. Oh yeah, the name of the dredge that's laid up in the winter blow allowing its crew to talk and play cards is the Leo B. Canterbury, so for those of you who wonder if the grand tradition has currency in the bayou country, rest assured that the spirit of Chaucer is alive and well in southwest Louisiana.

In "Deputy Sid's Gift," the last story in the collection, principle and practicality clash when a man who works in a geriatric home has his just about worthless truck stolen. Eventually he learns it was taken by a dirt poor alcoholic who needs it for shelter—not transportation. Well, Deputy Sid gets it back for him, but it gets taken again. What, after all, can be done? Putting the thief in jail will only give him food and shelter at taxpayer's expense. Deputy Sid's gift is one of understanding the nature of true charity. The narrative structure is complex—we are hearing the recounting of a confession, and the narrative convolutions match the story, which is not only about principle and practicality, but about grace, charity and simple compassion as well. Contradictions pile on contradictions, and the final mixture is a very pleasant gumbo, indeed.

These stories have true dirt in them, the kind of truth that rings perfect. The art here is transparent as fine crystal. Reading Tim Gautreaux will pay your time with wisdom and delight, and the writing is as basic and satisfying as dirty rice and a can of Jax. □

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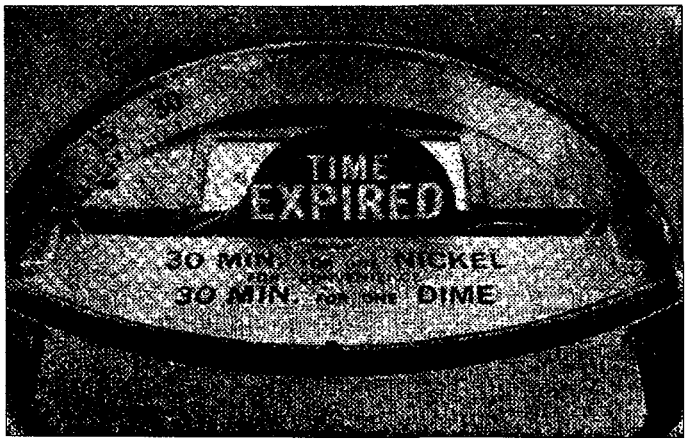
WHEN WELFARE RULES WERE



Changed, lots of people who already had trouble sleeping were driven from their beds by politicians

WHO — Instead of hurting poor–folk like that, instead of trying to do away with the so–called culture of dependence, could be trying to find ways of extending it to everybody.

As Josef Popper Lynkeus, then 74, wrote in 1912, "The time is ripe to propose something positive and a clear program...and at long last make an end to our present–day murderous and soul–smashing overall competitive forms of labor and life. Ethical conviction underlies my thesis (which I've been working on for forty years now) that the solution to the social problem is primarily one of assured subsidies for all."

M. KASPER

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JEANNE FOSTER

Ashes

for Richard McCarthy, 1908-95

He was my landlord and my friend.
He pruned each camellia and the lemon tree
by hand, not too neat, *windswept*, he said.

It wasn't much of a hole in the earth.
It looked like someone had lifted out a plug
to set a fencepost, maybe.
About the size of a coffee canister.
And the box, dark brown cardboard, was no fancy urn.
The lid stood open. The remains in a plastic bag
sealed with a tie, like a healthy grain.
A little puff of air blew some ashes up
just as the gardener—for so he seemed
in his work clothes and boots—unloosed the tie
and prepared to commend the spirit to the earth
under a red rose bush. Some settled on my lips,
I swear. They tasted salt, a pleasure
primitive and a bit perverse, like the taste of sperm or cunt.
When I spoke the words, *the Lord is my shepherd*, another voice
ghosted mine, barely audible, always a fraction behind.

These are the body of him
who lay zipped in hospital plastic
waiting on a gurney to be shipped
on the last passage. This is the cracked chest
where they tried to beat his heart back from death.
This is the squeezed oh of the mouth
where they inserted the tube to force his breath.
This is the dust that lighted on my lips.
This is the flesh I have tasted.

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■

All of him fit in the box, the whole box of them
fit into the plug in the earth.
Then the gardener came again. With rake,
he covered the place with cedar chips.
The administrator—for so she seemed, detached
in her straight black dress—placed a tiny plaque
on a two-inch stem in the earth, blank,
soon to be engraved. We took her word. The markers
might have named the roses but they named the flesh
by which the roses were fed.
In the car I mopped my lips with moist tissue paper.
But the taste lives—that powerful—
so does the vision of the flesh unzipped.
They had not expected visitors
or they would have made him *more presentable*,
the man in white coat gave me a moment alone
with the body, and closed the door.
I'd never noticed his eyelashes,
now asleep against his cheeks
in the youth of death.
Richard gathered me
so many bundles of sticks,
neatly tied and stowed, for kindling.

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Premieres and Adaptations

ROBERT L. KING

LAST YEAR, the McCarter Theatre in Princeton presented the American premiere of Marina Carr's *The Mai*, and the Royal Court in London the English premiere of her later play, *Portia Coughlan*. *The Mai* won a best new play award in Dublin in 1994, the year that Carr turned thirty. *Portia Coughlan* was nominated for a similar prize in London; by now, Carr has probably finished new plays commissioned by the Abbey Theatre and the Royal Court. One of her short stories has also won a prize. Unlike her title characters, Carr is a woman with a bright future.

Both The Mai and Portia Coughlan are, as one of them says, "trapped"; both drown themselves. The Mai's suicide and, less clearly, Portia Coughlan's are not simply desperate acts of escape from a world beyond their control like some other fictional suicides. Rather, they purposefully act out the moral consequences of their society's values. They are defined by Irish culture but never mention the IRA; they are feminists who make no arguments for change. Alone among the characters in the play, The Mai has more a title than a name. While her sisters are known as Connie and Beck and her daughter is Millie, she is always referred to as The Mai, sounded just like the month. Combined with the definite article, May gives her symbolic singularity, recalling for an Irish audience the Blessed Mother of God. Besides invoking Mary's month, Carr dresses The Mai in the Virgin's color; a blue nightgown becomes her shroud. *The Mai*, however, is not a point by point allegory. Religion hardly gets mentioned, but like the dramatic uses of music, it is a cultural given, so ingrained that allusions casually introduced carry instrumental meanings.

The silky nightgown is a gift from The Mai's husband, Robert, who is playing the cello with his back to the audience at the opening of the play. He is absorbed in the music and in himself; he left his wife five years earlier and now cannot tell one daughter from the other. Robert descends from the upper level of the two-tiered set and with his wife positioned like his cello draws the bow across her breasts. At the end of *The Mai*, she plays his cello, the instrument she gave up to marry him. Then, she draws the bow across her body, an allusion both to his playing on her and, because of its inwardness and silence, to her suicide, enacted earlier in the play.

During Robert's absence, The Mai has built the lakeside house where the play is set. She left Ireland for a time when he left her, but although she put her own children in the care of others, she returned to them to build the house, sufficiently enriched by her hard work as sweeper in a beauty parlor and by an Arab benefactor whose daughter she befriended. The sleek lines of the room and of the furniture represent a house far removed from the Ireland of tourist brochures or terror bombings. In the rear the house opens to the abstract lines of hills reflected in the lake, a vision of nature like a Georgia O'Keeffe. Above the set, two rows of five wires each run across the stage; they are lit unevenly throughout, sometimes glistening, but never overbearing symbols of the lost music their graph-like lines might register. The Mai's grandmother enters struggling with a large oar, a useless burden inside a house and, so, an apt comment on her stories about love with her "nine-fingered fisherman" and an exotic Moroccan. The Mai's two sisters are the extremes on either side of her life. When the three talk at length, Connie, married as a virgin and faithful thereafter, admits to fantasies about sex with strangers. Beck, who has done it all with more men than she can recall, still remains unfulfilled. Connie points out that the sisters want the very life that they condemn in Robert: a life of music and romance.

Robert cheats on The Mai soon after his return, and she reacts with conventional attempts to save the marriage. She confronts the other woman in an offstage scene and is rebuffed. She dresses in a slinky black dress to accompany Robert to a formal affair, but he, in sharp contrast to the praise she gets from her daughter and grandmother, says only "Right" when she stands ready for his approval. Once at the social, he strands her on the dance floor to be with his lover, refuses at first to give her the car keys and then blames her for creating a scene. Even in the face of this humiliation, she stays with him. When Robert berated her for criticizing his obviously bad treatment, the man behind us was exasperated enough to say in more than a whisper, "They're both nuts." And if *The Mai* were a melodrama, his judgment would be the final one, but Carr's sympathetic understanding of The Mai earns a deeper response than the ones generated by stock conflicts. The Mai is an anchor of sorts for her rotter of a husband, a man who needs to return to prove to himself that he can go away. She sees herself as "trapped," not exclu-

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sively by the expectations a limiting society imposes on women but by what her own drive has created—the dream place where she has built a house for the family she loves. The place is a lovely trap like the magical lake where swans mate for life and where immersion in its beckoning beauty leads to death, not to the rebirth promised by religious beliefs so strong that the play need not articulate them.

Portia Coughlan has themes similar to those of *The Mai*; it has the same structural pattern which disrupts chronology to bring the title character back on stage after her suicide. Portia, too, is trapped, unable to break loose from an unhappy marriage or from the stronger ties to her dead twin, Gabriel. Her husband also has an angelic name, Raphael, yet his limp constantly reminds us that this financial success and loyal husband is earth-bound. The opening moments of the play present Portia drinking alone in her living room on her thirtieth birthday; on the level above her, her dead twin appears, singing plaintively. Carr's stage directions indicate the relationship her play will develop: the twins are in "*isolating lights*" and their movements "*mirror*" each other. That is, they are separate together, connected and apart. Gabriel drowned himself fifteen years earlier, and Portia will soon follow him into the same river at the same spot where they planned to die together. Besides drink, Portia has turned to causal sex as escape, but all to no point because she cannot understand the past that weighs upon her.

As in *The Mai*, Carr works the stuff of melodrama to dig beneath its surface. In sensational plays, the suicides would come as tear-jerking finales, as resolutions to socially insoluble complications. Carr's women reappear on stage after their deaths in scenes that precede the suicides; as a result, the ensuing scenes emphasize the unspoken motives behind their deaths, not the deaths themsellves. Portia's body is raised on a pulley to open Act II; it is dripping water and river growth, hardly an object of sentimental grief. In Act III, she tells her husband that she hoped to find a meaningful life with him; she admits that she lied about having one affair, probably to jolt him into a new awareness of her. Like The Mai, then, Portia is too self-determining to be simply a victim of circumstances. Both women resist the pressures of their enclosing worlds; the obvious manifestations of those pressures—husband, family, place—are not nearly so dominant as they ones they cannot see. The Mai can neither achieve nor reject the ideal of the May Virgin, and Portia is fighting blind against a past kept hidden from her.

In the last act of the play, two brief scenes from the end, Portia's aunt reveals, but not to her, that her parents are "brother an' sister," that Portia and Gabriel had the "same father, different mothers" and that her grandmother allowed her parents to marry out of a false sense of pride. The aunt believes that "Gabriel Scully war insane from too much inbreedin'." More subtly, Portia's lover has linked her and her brother sexually when he complained that she has been running backward and forward "between me and Raphael an' yar twin." The brother's spectral image and his haunting song appear to Portia throughout the play; she cannot know the true source of their appeal to her, nor can she know how completely her love for him, necessarily self-destructive and incestuous, undermines the ideal of family that gives her world its cracked foundation. At best, she and The Mai vaguely apprehend the cultural obstacles they face and that puzzled awareness contributes to the plays' moral dilemmas. Carr gives depth to the familiar circumstances of the trapped woman and avoids the overheated conflicts of didactic art.

In several places, Carr does go for the easy effect. The grandmother in *The Mai* smokes dope, and Portia's aunt, the local whore, is trailed by a mousy husband who has a personal supply of digestive crackers always at the ready. One of Portia's last speeches lands with a Freudian thump: she thinks that she and Gabriel had sex in the womb with water swelling around their ears. The dialect is sometimes difficult to decipher on the printed page; some key passages went by me in the theater. In general, though, Carr's touch is sure and original; for example, Stacia, Portia's friend with an eye patch, is known as the Cyclops of Coolinarney, a culturally challenging epithet if ever there was one.

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From time to time, The Mai's daughter, sixteen-year-old Millie, delivers narration straight out to the audience. Her point of view is singular—she has the play's earthiest diction—but too often her commentary belongs in a story being read rather than a play being performed.

THE BRIEF SPEECHES that Andrew Kwong addresses to the house in David Henry Hwang's *Golden Child* serve a sharply different and more dramatic function because his character is as much a framing device as story teller. Hwang encourages us to identify with the savvy Kwong, our contemporary, to give us a clearer perspective on life in a Chinese village some eighty years ago. Kwong is on his way to Kennedy Airport; his taxi gets stuck in traffic, and his grandmother appears to him. She is carrying a shopping bag which proclaims "Jesus Saves," and she tells him that he must be born again. In the cab, Kwong is surrounded by the same slogan, Hwang's early image of religion and commerce in vulgar confusion. The grandmother's God watches over every detail of our lives and can be punitive; as she warns Kwong, if you reject Jesus, "always you will get traffic." Then, in a striking display of the actor's and playwright's art, the grandmother becomes a child in a transformation accomplished only by removing her glasses and kerchief and by changing her posture and facial expression. No added make-up, no labored commentary. She helps Kwong don a blue robe; he becomes her father, Eng Tieng-Bin, and in a few moments, the play moves to Southeast China where most of it takes place.

In *M. Butterfly*, Hwang put an imaginary mirror between audience and performer in one of many highly theatrical scenes that led the audience to reflect on the significance of costume, make-up and role. In *Golden Child*, he sets three pavilions before us, one for each of Tieng-Bin's wives. They are stages within the stage, at once singular and similar, like the women who occupy them. As wives these women are performers for their husband; as women they are confined to their allotted places. The set created a beautifully apt metaphor for their status.

Tieng-Bin is a successful businessman returning home from the Philippines after a long absence. His wives are rivals for his attention and, consequently, for control over his life at home. The first wife is the most committed to traditional values; their marriage was arranged before the two ever met. She assigns chores and dinner places to the other wives at the welcoming meal for their husband, and she is the most threatened when he says that he is leaning toward some "modern" beliefs, Christianity among them. Under the influence of a "white demon" Anglican missionary, Tieng-Bin allows Siu-Yong, daughter by his first wife, to unbind her feet, one cause of that wife's suicide. The immediate cause is his frenzied destruction of the ancestral shrine she reverently maintains; Tieng-Bin does not realize that his anger is directed against himself, torn as he is between the demands of his new religion and his ties to the old. The maxim Siu-Yong hears from her mother shortly before she kills herself embodies a parallel conflict: "Humility is power and death is the ultimate humility."

After his conversion, Tieng-Bin would devote himself only to his third wife. She has not only dressed in a seductive nightgown for him, she listens to Western music and has put a crucifix at her family shrine. But the second wife, more clever than the others, learns best how to adapt. She dresses as a Victorian holdover to have tea with the missionary and to plant doubts in his mind about the first wife. She converts to Christianity to compete with the third wife on her own terms. For her, accommodation is the only working principle, but however cagey she is, she is still the result of an upbringing that taught her the forms of pragmatic submission. Finally, she is the wife who endures. The third dies in childbirth, and the baby has no stage life. Before *Golden Child* returns to the present in its final scene, Tieng-Bin

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prays at his family shrine; like his third wife's, his has a crucifix, a sign of his cultural ambivalence. As he prays downstage, his wives appear behind him, each in her own place and separately lit. They are present to us as they stand behind him, and the play responds to one of its first lines. The early one, "This is America, everyone's ashamed of their ancestors," is countered by "In the eyes of our descendants we will all be born again." Reinforming "born again," Hwang suggests that when either culture relies on single-minded fervor, it cannot supply truths to live by—either for Kwong, the Asian faces projected on a scrim behind him or, I suspect, for the greatly talented author himself.

PATRICK MARBER'S *Dealer's Choice* had its American premiere at the Long Wharf Theatre last fall after opening at the Royal National Theatre in 1995 and winning a couple of prizes in its later, commercial run in London. It is Marber's first play and the National has commissioned a second. Like Marina Carr with her two grants from the Arts Council, he is receiving the kind of support and opportunities—he directed his play, too—that new playwrights here might only dream about. The poker players in his all-male cast deny themselves any real choices beyond naming the game when the deal works around to them. The game is their weekly ritual, they fail to see it as part of the routine that they need to escape. Their apparent diversion has a whirlpool effect; poker attracts and defeats them, the money winners included. They are trapped by delusions of power, money and masculinity. Like the play itself, they use bantering humor, but as cover for their basic failings.

All three acts take place in a restaurant; the game itself is played in the basement in the final act. Stephen owns the restaurant; Sweeney is the cook, and Mugsy and Frankie are the waiters. Carl is Stephen's son, addicted to gambling and deeply in debt to a professional player, Ash, who makes his first appearance in the weekly game.

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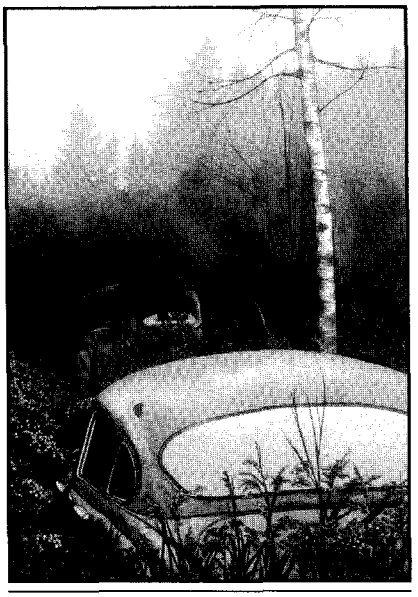

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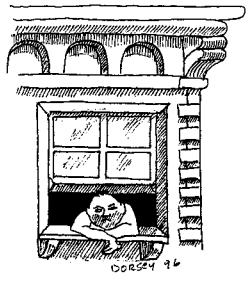
Mugsy dreams of opening his own restaurant and needs one-thousand pounds to secure the site, a public toilet on a busy road. He is a mug, a dupe for better players. Although he too is in debt, he buys a tie, overpriced at thirty pounds, and then forgets to take off the bicycle clip from his trousers. Mugsy has enlisted Carl's help as partner to approach Stephen for the money he needs, but he doesn't realize that Carl wants only to cover the three thousand pounds he owes Ash. Stephen is apparently level-headed; he judges Mugsy as a loser, dismissing him and the others with a world-weary wit. Like the much younger Sweeney, Stephen is divorced and, as we come to learn, organizes the poker game to see his son once a week and to control his employees, the worst kind of impulsive gamblers. Each of them owes him money, Mugsy against future earnings and Frankie as tuition of sorts to take him to Las Vegas and a career as a professional gambler.



Ash, icy and taciturn, is on stage at the opening of Act II; he has finished a meal and insinuates himself into the game because Carl can offer no other way of clearing his debt. The regulars, Stephen excepted, offer Ash no real challenge as the game wears on through the night. No fool, Stephen comes to appreciate the game behind the game.

STEPHEN: How much did you say you were up?
ASH: About three grand.
STEPHEN: Is three enough, Carl?

When Stephen wins a big pot from him, Ash challenges him to risk four thousand pounds on a coin toss. Alone on the stage, they circle each other as Ash commands him to call, and Stephen answers No nine times. Their voices rise to shouts until Ash's final one, "Call, you yellow cunt," and Stephen answers "Heads." The contempt behind the obscenity, if only the men had the moral insight to know it, hits at both of them, for fearful hatred of women and the accusation of cowardice raise a macho standard most valid for the truly weak. Ash pockets the coin without looking at it, having proved his point that Stephen is as addicted and compulsive as his son and as Ash himself. At this point Ash has forced Stephen to live by his own arrogant standards: "You've got no discipline," he has told his son, "you play like a girl."

RANDY NEWMAN'S Faust—the title is revealing—opened the season of the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. Attaching his name to the mythic figure, Newman implies a claim on equal footing with Goethe and Gounod whose treatments of the legend earned them a continuing authority. Since many of the contemporary references in *Newman's Faust* have a deliberate lowering effect, the musical would have to reach a very high level of achievement to avoid a self-mocking irony in its juxtaposition of the author's name and the legendary scholar's. The first act comes closer than the second to reaching such a goal, but the work's initial premise cannot sustain the weight of a full-length musical play. The problem does not derive from our age's general loss of belief; people still applaud Gounod after all. *Newman's Faust* suffers from another, self-imposed constriction. Its wit is only reductive; like literary burlesque, its sharp contrasts permit no shadings and become increasingly easier to anticipate and shrug off. The most dedicated of Restoration scholars don't curl up with *Hudibras* for a long night of recreational reading.

The Faust whom Lucifer misleads is a Notre Dame student with rock-star aspirations. Like the Travolta image on a screen above the stage at the opening, he represents civilization in decline, a victim of Saturday Night Fever. His rendition of "Bless the Children of the World" nicely spoofs "We Are the World" of the early '80s. "Gainesville" at Act I's conclusion does the same to "Little Girl from Little Rock." The lyric "It's a great day tonight for the Irish" comes out "It's a damn fine day for the Irish." Black power pops up in Las Vegas. *Newman's Faust* is no more focused than this list of random examples of its tone and relevance. The production values, the singing and acting of the large, talented cast led by David Garrison as Lucifer justified the hope behind appointing an executive producer for a commercial production, presumably Broadway, after the Goodman run. The book alone, co-written by Newman and David Mamet, so far has proved too slight for such ambitious plans.

EQUALLY IMPRESSIVE in its staging and acting was the Steppenwolf's dramatization of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a promising choice for the company after it reinvigorated *A Clockwork Orange* two seasons ago. A prefatory caution is delivered by The Man who serves as intermediator between the audience and the play, and it proves too true: "What you are about to hear is jumbled and jagged because it is told by a pillar of salt." "Jumbled and jagged" follows from the shifts between past, present and future, and from trips to the fourth dimension. Readers of the novel would expect no less. However, The Man's ironic refrain, "And so it goes," caps too many scenes and encourages a bemused distance, a tired superiority to the events of the play, some of which are truly horrific and demand moral involvement. "Pillar of salt," like Billy Pilgrim's name and the town of Ilium, sound now like entries in a dictionary of literary allusions. Beautifully acted by Rick Snyder (Billy) and others, the sophisticated artifice of *Slaughterhouse-Five* seemed an end in itself and was finally unsatisfying.

Since I am praising the acting of the simpler plays, I should add that the cast of *Dealer's Choice* was a true ensemble, that the American cast in Princeton was as convincing and talented as the Irish one for the other Carr play in London, and that all the acting in *Golden Child* was exceptionally strong. □

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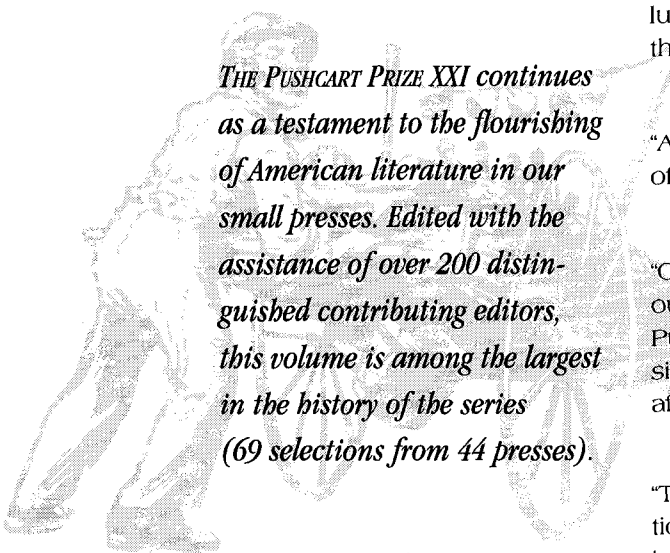

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